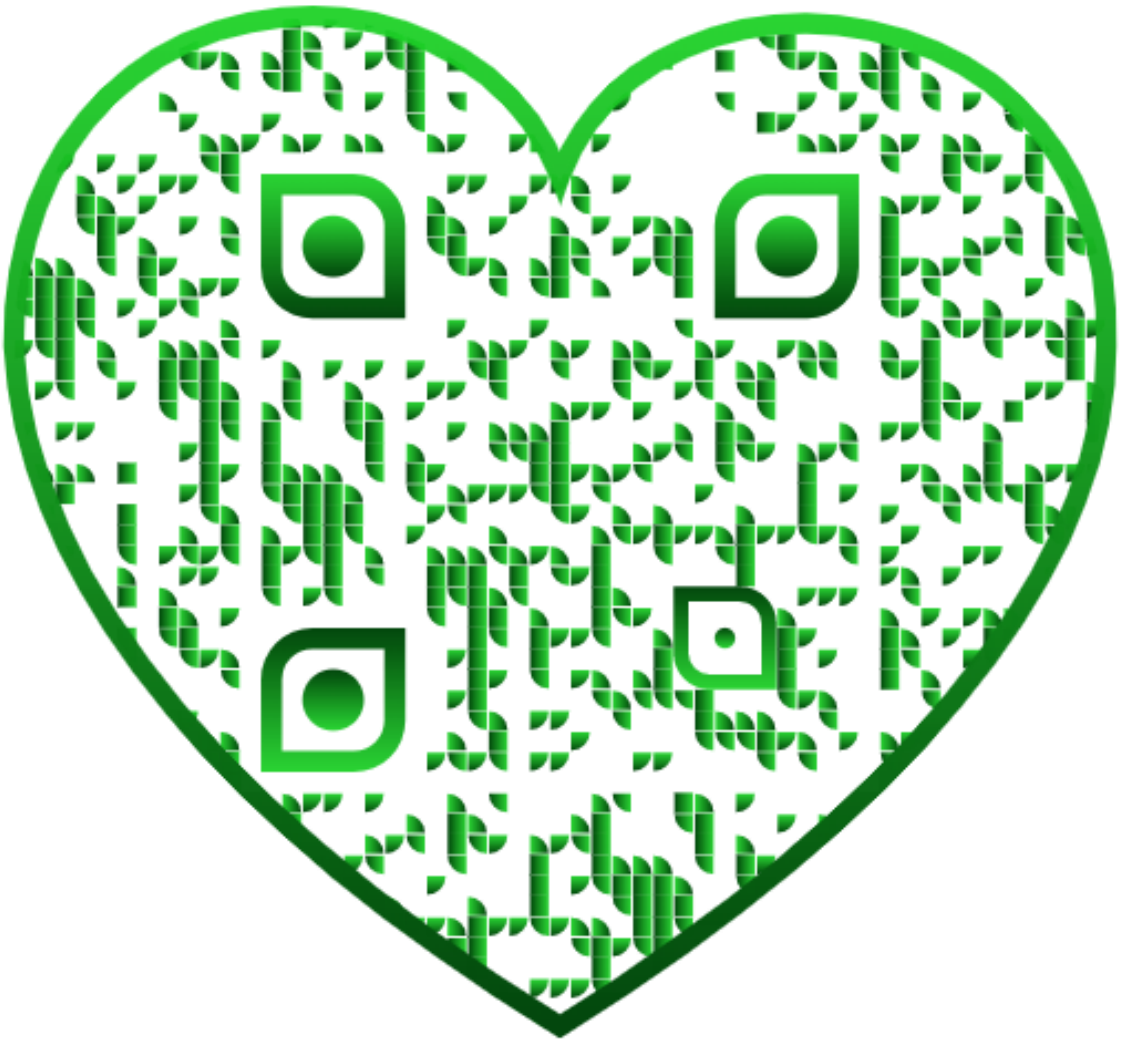
THE HIDDEN TRUTHS OF HISTORY'S MOST NOTORIOUS SECRET SOCIETY

THE FREEMASONS

THE MYSTERIOUS ROOTS OF FREEMASONRY

CONRAD BAUER



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Hidden Truths of History's Most Notorious Secret Society

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Simply because they are so very secretive, people are liable to project their beliefs onto the hidden group. But, in this book, we will try and focus only on the facts. Sometimes, these facts can be far more shocking than the theories or speculation. Read on and discover the secret truths of the ancient Freemasons.

In the Beginning

One of the biggest mysteries surrounding the Freemasons is their origin. For centuries now, people have argued back and forth about precisely when the order was founded and by whom. There have been several competing theories, many disproved notions, and some outright forgeries. The question of origin is huge. While today we might have a current incarnation of the Freemasons capable of operating entirely independently from the actions of a secret society formed many centuries ago; some people believe that it is the founding members of the order who provided the ideological foundation—and thus the direction and objectives—of the Freemasons. If we want to understand the Freemasons, we have to understand where they came from.

But that is not to say that we have to select a single theory and stick with it. On the contrary, the origin stories of the Freemasons can be incredibly helpful in our attempt to understand just why opinion about this order is so fractured and controversial. The differences between the versions of origin stories that people choose to believe will often reflect their inherent biases and opinions. For example, those who believe that the Freemasons are a continuation of the Knights Templar, might be more willing to believe that the order still guards ancient secrets. On the other hand, those who believe that the order was a gentleman's club formed in the Eighteenth Century, seem far less inclined toward the more controversial opinions of the Masonic Order. Thus, by learning about all of the different origin stories, we can begin to understand and get a grip on just why and how opinions about the Freemasons can differ so widely.

So, by learning the history of the Freemasons, we can gather a unique insight into how they function in the world today. That is to say, while not every account of the historic order of the Freemasons is true, the fact that these stories have formed part of public opinion of the order gives us some measure of insight. By understanding those stories which are not true—as well as those that are—we can form our own opinions and have a better, more cohesive understanding. As ever, the truth invariably lies in the middle

ground; and the story of the Freemasons is often a shadowy, clandestine narrative written in shades of grey. Without definitive heroes and villains, some people can struggle to understand the reality of the situation. Therefore, we must attempt to discover more about every single aspect of the Masonic history, rather than just the highlights.

That is why it helps to start at the very beginning, however, when even the age of the Order of the Freemasons is debated, telling the full and complete story can be difficult. In cases such as this, it can help to take a chronological approach. While the early history of the Masons often involves entirely different groups of people, including those who will never have heard of the name 'Freemasons,' learning about this background will give us a greater understanding when the key players start to move into place. Freemasonry did not emerge into the world fully formed. Instead, establishment of the order (whenever this happened to be) was the result of multiple forces and motions. World events conspired to lead to the founding of the Freemasons and so—if we want to truly understand where the order came from—we should try and understand this background in greater detail. This means we will need to travel back hundreds of years, to a world much changed from our modern society.

The story of Freemasonry is one of legends. For many years—centuries, even—the Freemasons simply existed. Though many people knew that they existed, there was little knowledge of where they had come from or what had prompted their formation. That changed toward the end of the Seventeenth Century, however. Masons at that time began to question their own origin and began to investigate where they had come from. Over the years, this historical inquiry began to include outsiders and those who were either not involved or were suspicious of Masonry. As such, a more complete, more rigorous, and historical profile of the group started to emerge. But the details are still hotly contested. For the oldest verifiable origins, we will have to go back to medieval times.

If you spend more than ten minutes researching the Masons on the internet, you will come across one name over and over again—the Knights Templar. As it happens, they are tightly wound into the story of the Masons. However,

this involvement is often disputed. What we do know, is that the Knights Templar are credited with involvement in the formation of the Freemasons. And whether it is true or not, since that theory is so widespread, we should spend time learning about the Knights Templar, so that we may better understand what it is about this group that makes people so willing to tie them to the Masons and their history. The story of the Knights Templar is complicated and disputed in its own right, but the history is fascinating, nevertheless.

The Knights Templar

There have been hundreds, if not thousands of books written on the subject of the Knights Templar. They captivate the imagination of the masses in a way that few other organizations have, except perhaps the Freemasons. Given that the two organizations are among the most famous and intriguing of their type, it seems only natural that they should be linked. Furthermore, the blending of the histories of the two organizations means that our story will begin much further back in time. To discover the verifiable roots of the Knights Templar, we must travel back to the turn of the previous millennium.

The story begins with the Crusades. A Holy War fought between the Catholic Church and the early iteration of Islam, the disagreement emerged over the nature of the territory itself. To put it briefly (and to do a disservice to the rich cultural heritage of the city), Jerusalem became a key geopolitical issue. With both major religions laying claim to the area as being sacred (as well as Judaism, another religion, doing the same), there were frequent disagreements over who would control the city. For hundreds of years, power had ebbed and flowed in the region. At the time when we join the story, in 1095, Jerusalem was under the control of the Muslim rulers.

Like many historical events, the situation was complicated. We won't have time with the scope of this book to go into the various political quarrels and disagreements. For example, the original precept for the invasion of the Holy Lands by the westerners was concerned with aiding the Byzantine Emperor in repelling an attack by Seljuk Turks. Gradually, as the Papacy and other key Western states became involved, that fight grew into a wider campaign to retake Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, which had been under Muslim control since the 7 th Century. Added to this, various power struggles within the Western royal houses meant that certain rulers were keen to launch military campaigns, others wished to endear themselves to the church, and there were those who were convinced to join for other political reasons or obligations.

Essentially, however, the Holy Lands—sometimes referred to as the Levant—became a target for a newly formed Christian army. These Crusaders, as they became known, made their way from Britain, France, Germany, and Italy (as well as other states) via the land. Along the way, there were various incidents, including one notable and savage attack on a Jewish community in the Rhineland. The violence along the route would set the tone for the eventual arrival in Jerusalem.

The First Crusade (there would be more to come) was handled like a true military campaign. As the Crusaders made their way from city to city, from places like Antioch and Nicaea, they lay siege to and captured key towns, cities, and castles. The process took years and many lives were lost, but eventually they made it to the city of Jerusalem.

Laying siege to the Holy City in 1099, the Crusaders found themselves in difficult terrain. Outside of the city, the countryside was an arid wasteland. There was little in the way of water or food and, so far away from home, they were struggling for sustenance. Running out of time, out of supplies, and out of manpower, they were unable to fully surround the city and prevent supplies from getting in. Though they had begun their campaign with tens of thousands of men, many of them on horseback, they were now down to 12,000, with only 1,500 of these being cavalrymen. These men were all that remained, taken from various countries and backgrounds. Making camp now, their morale was at an all-time low.

An initial attack on the walls was repulsed. Next, they attempted to march around the walls, chanting at the tops of their lungs after a three day fast. It was hoped that the walls would fall just like the biblical story of Jericho. It failed. After receiving news of a backup Muslim army setting off from Egypt to repel the Crusaders, one final assault on Jerusalem was required. On the 15th of July, a double pronged attack on the city caused the defenders to flee the walls. The crusaders were inside.

What followed was a massacre. The Crusaders had marched for years, covering thousands of miles and losing many friends along the way, all with the goal of retaking Jerusalem. The bloodbath has passed into legend for its

barbarism and brutality. Most notable—at least, in terms of the story we are telling—were the activities on Temple Mount. Many defenders were said to have retreated to the spot, one of the most holy places in the world. Temple Mount was vital to the three major Abrahamic religions, home to the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock and the Dome of the Chain. Legend has it that the biblical figure Solomon built his temple on this spot, a temple which was destroyed and rebuilt a number of times. For Muslims, it is the third most holy site in the world, the place from which Muhammad ascended to heaven. As the Crusaders attacked, it seemed a natural place to seek sanctuary.

The Crusaders pursued and cut down anyone they found. Eventually a pause was called by the leader, allowing those who were sheltering in the Al-Aqsa mosque to be saved. They would last a day, the Crusader commanders waiting until the streets of Jerusalem ran red with blood before entering the mosque and killing the sheltering foes. As the Crusaders took over the city and began to erect the nascent Kingdom of Jerusalem, the city was coming to terms with bloodshed on an unprecedented scale. Thousands were dead, many more injured. Half a world away from home, the Crusaders set about the business of ruling the Holy Land.

This was the world into which the Knights Templar was born. Following the violent conquering of Jerusalem, Christianity now had control of one of the religion's most holy sites. Pilgrimage to the spot became important, for people demonstrating their devotion to Jesus Christ. In a time when the only way to travel for example, from France to Jerusalem, was on foot for those who were poor), by horse for the rich, or by boat for those both rich and lucky. By any measure, such a journey was long and treacherous. Furthermore, the violence left behind in the wake of the Crusade hardly endeared Christians to the local communities they passed through in the Levant region. While Jerusalem might have been under the control of the Christians, the surrounding area was not quite so safe.

Plagued by bandits, thieves, and those bearing a grudge for the violence waged against the Muslim communities by the Crusader's, it was not uncommon for Christian pilgrims to be attacked and sometimes even killed during their trip. At the worst, highwaymen were killing travelling parties of

hundreds of people. Over the course of the ensuing decades, this violence got worse and worse. Eventually, someone decided to do something, offering protection to the pilgrims making their journey. That man was Hugues de Payens, a French knight who, in 1119, petitioned the rulers of Jerusalem for the permission to creation a new society. De Payens's vision was of a religious, monastic order, a disciplined band of knights who would swear to provide protection to the pilgrims. By 1120, the request was granted, and the new band, known as the Knights Templar, was formed.

The name came from their base of operations. The new order was awarded a wing of the royal palace, the building situated atop Temple Mount, located within the captured mosque where the city defenders had hidden before being killed. To some, it seemed strange to award such a young group with such a privileged piece of real estate. It would be the first of many mysteries surrounding the Knights Templar.

At first, the organization filled one of the most important needs for the new Christian government in the Holy Land. Along with other Monastic orders, the Templars became a kind of makeshift standing army. Despite coming from different backgrounds and nationalities, the rulers of Jerusalem were finally able to project an organized professional military power. It was no surprise that their number grew rapidly, their importance recognized almost immediately.

But along with the growth in numbers, the Templars experienced a growth in wealth and political power. At the beginning, the order had been composed of nine knights, with scant finances and a dependence on donations from powerful Christian rulers. Indeed, the full title of their organization was 'Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon.' To further press this image of poverty upon the world, they had taken as their symbol two knights riding a single horse, an iconographic representation of the Templar's poverty. But this poverty was not long-lasting.

The Knights Templar had friends in powerful places. Thanks to these friends, they quickly moved ahead in the pecking order of monastic knights in the Holy Land. High ranking members of the church took it upon themselves to

sing their praises, a move which eventually led to an official, formal endorsement from the Vatican. As such, the Knights Templar became far more than a simple, localized military order. They gained a reputation and a favored status across the Christian world. Soon, people were encouraged to assist the Templars. From across Europe, people began to donate land, money, business, and even family members to the Knights Templar. More than one powerful aristocratic family dispatched a young male member to the Holy Lands with the intent that he would join the Templars. As the group's wealth swelled, they received a further boon when a papal decree known as Omne Datum Optimum made them exempt from the local laws of the nations. The Templars—and the Templars alone, it seemed—could pass across any border, would not be subject to any local taxes, and were not beholden to any authority, other than the pope and God. Within the space of two decades, the knights from atop Temple Mount had become one of the most powerful and wealthiest groups in the world.

Over the course of the years to follow, the Templars became more and more essential to the balance of power in the Near East. Fighting against the legendary Saladin, they used military expertise and training to wage a continued campaign for control of the Holy Land. But while the military victories might have been essential to those in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem, it was the burgeoning wealth of the order which would be more keenly felt in Europe. Following the papal endorsements, the coffers of the Knights Templar were overflowing. One of the biggest revenue streams came when aristocrats and nobles placed their assets into the care of the Templars. When a nobleman decided that he would 'do his duty' and take part in the Crusades, he could sign over his lands and businesses to the Templars, who would run it in his absence. They would take a cut for doing so, and the nobleman would be assured that his assets would receive care and attention in his absence, and be returned to him when he left the Holy Land. With a variety of revenue streams, the Templars were able to establish one of the most important institutions in the medieval age. The bank of the Knights Templar.

In the decades following the Templars' growth, the vast majority of new recruits were assigned not to military roles, but to administrative positions.

The reason was simple. There was a huge trend for many people to travel through the Holy Lands. Often, these were rich aristocrats who did not want to carry their wealth with them because the countryside was often laden with bandits. Now, they could travel with a minimal amount of money, relying on the Templars to aid them. The Templars had branches in every major city. A deposit of money made in one of these would equip a person with a signed letter, detailing the nature of the wealth that had been provided. Once the person reached Jerusalem, they could visit another branch of the Templars office and make a withdrawal. It was, in many ways, the precursor to the modern banking system, the arrival of what has often been considered the first real international conglomerate.

In hardly any time at all, the Knights Templar had grown from a band of nine poor knights to one of the most powerful groups in the world. They had wealth in many forms. They took the donations they received and the money they made and bought land across Europe and the Middle East. They built farms and vineyards, establishing businesses that made them even more money. They built castles, cathedrals, and fortifications all over Europe, as far outside their original territories as possible, with Templar forts being found as far west as Portugal. They imported, exported, manufactured, farmed, banked, and owned their own fleet of ships that crisscrossed the Mediterranean. At one point, they even owned the entire island of Cyprus.

As the Knights Templar grew ever more powerful, other countries began to sit up and take notice. The original Templars had been a dedicated group of knights, sworn to protect the poor pilgrims moving across the Holy Land. By the end of the 12 th Century, however, they had become one of the most powerful organizations on the planet. They were not beholden to local laws, even in countries such as France, Britain, and Germany. Answering only to the pope, those countries which held a grudge against the Vatican began to view the Templars with suspicion.

It is not uncommon for many of the theories regarding the Freemasons' power to relate to the international banking community. People have labelled the existence of the big banks as an international cabal and as being responsible for a number of (seemingly unconnected) global events. In this

respect, it's easy to draw parallels between these conceptions of the Freemasons, and the banking traditions of the Knights Templar. While many people use the (often tenuous) relationship between the Freemasons and the global banking community as an accusatory measure, it echoes medieval suspicions of the Templars.

In the history books, it's not uncommon for people to label the Knights Templar of the late 12 th Century as arrogant. It's easy to see why they might have been. In less than a century, they had risen from purposefully humble origins to become a major international player. The original military commanders of the organization had long passed away, some in battle, some of natural causes. The man who had taken charge, Grand Master de Ridfort, was not loved by heads of state and powerful nobles. They viewed him and his organization as arrogant.

Added to this, the balance of power in the Holy Land was beginning to tip. While the Crusaders had captured Jerusalem decades earlier, their grip the surrounding area was beginning to loosen. Saladin was a prodigal commander, succeeding in wresting control of many essential sites across the Levant. The Templars, once an essential projection of Christian military power, were tainted by association with the new failings. As Saladin's army enjoyed success, people began to resent the Templars for their failure to maintain control of the Holy Land. When Saladin re-conquered Jerusalem in 1187, it became an easy stick with which to beat the Templars. That the remaining land held by Christians in the area—a thin strip of territory along the coast—was owned by the Templars, seemed to be a further issue, people accusing the Templars of protecting their own interests, rather than those of Christianity.

Over the course of the next hundred years, power really shifted in the region. By 1296, the Holy Land was considered completely lost. Muslim rulers in Egypt had swept in from the south and helped to completely drive Christian influence from the area. The Templars reacted by shifting their base of operations away from the Levant, instead operating out of their holdings on Cyprus. Across Europe, rumblings of another Crusade emerged and the Templars began to focus on their business empire instead.

But their enemies did not forget. One of the most important of the Templars' foes was the king of France, Philip IV. Philip had a variety of reasons for hating the order. Not only did he resent their influence and their immunity to local laws, but he was himself hugely in debt to the Templars. Wanting to continue his expensive wars against Edward I of England (rather than fighting a Crusade), he envied the wealth of the Knights Templar and wished to make it his own. Elsewhere in Europe, he was fighting against the Holy Roman Empire (in modern day Germany) and had a somewhat corrosive relationship with the Vatican. Philip was in a difficult place and the wealth of the Templars seemed to be an obvious target.

Philip's fortunes changed after two key events. First, the King of England died. His replacement was Edward II, a weaker and less formidable foe. Furthermore, a change in pope saw the previous Holy See replaced by someone more prone to treat Philip with kindness, the Frenchman Pope Clement V.

Early rumors suggested that the new pope meant a new Crusade. It was not uncommon for potential pope's to voice their ambitions to retake Jerusalem and, when Pope Clement V ascended the Throne of Peter, the Knights Templar wondered whether a new crusade might mean a chance to return to the Holy Lands and retake their positions of wealth and influence, both of which had been waning since leaving the Levant. Keen to listen to the ideas of the new pope, the Templars dispatched their grandmaster to France, where Clement was staying.

The Grandmaster of the Templars, Jacques de Molay, was an aging man. He arrived in France armed with a collection of plans and schemes that the Templars had developed in order to retake Jerusalem. He was received with apparent good intentions, humored and welcomed. But it was not to last. Together, Philp and Clement had been plotting the downfall of the Knights Templar. On the 13 th of October, 1307, the authorities launched an assault on the Templars, placing every member in France under arrest. According to legend, this fateful day was Friday the 13 th , the original reasoning as to why such a date might be considered unlucky.

The arrests were not just significant in and of themselves. The Templars who were arrested were subjected to torture and punishment. In the French cells, the authorities extracted confessions and admissions. Apparently, the Templars had become an unholy institution, beset by the worship of false idols, unchristian practices, and considerable amounts of sin. These dubiously obtained confessions were held aloft as proof of the Templars' guilt and were used as a precept for dismantling the international organization of the Knights Templar.

The campaign against the Templars in France was vicious and quick. But it was not global. Even though the pope had issued a papal decree to outlaw the Knights Templar, other rules were not so quick to act. In England, for example, the new King Edward II refrained from acting. Instead of arresting all the Templars he could find, he wrote to the Vatican to petition for the order's innocence. When the pope responded with an official decree reiterating the decision, Edward had no choice but to act and, in January of 1308, he too issued an arrest order for the Templars in England. In the three months between the two actions, however, the local members of the order had plenty of time to make themselves scarce. With them went much of their treasure, not only the jewels and precious metals, but their detailed records as well.

As such, the institution of the Knights Templar was deemed illegal overnight. As the French King moved through the Templar estates and holdings, seizing their wealth for himself, the group's international conglomerate was forcibly dismantled. With members now officially labelled as devil worshipping heathens, it was no longer profitable to visibly be a member of the organization. Those Templars that were not caught, tortured, and killed were forced to go into hiding. Thanks to the political maneuvering, the group was forced to become a secret society.

But now that the Knights Templar had been driven underground, where could they go? One of the few places they had left available was Scotland. Scotland, like a number of other countries around Europe, was in a perilous political position. At odds with England, they were somewhat excluded from

the international community. Pressure from the English crown distanced the Scottish monarchy from the rest of Europe and the authority of the pope. While the rest of Europe was busy hounding down the Templars, the Scottish did not even issue an order for their arrest. Taking care to conceal themselves in these tumultuous times, it is believed that many members of the Knights Templar took what they could of their incredible wealth and travelled north to Scotland.

For some people, this is where the theories about the Knights Templar really begin to splinter. It is at this point that there is a real divergence between the provable histories of the organization and those possibilities which veer much further off the beaten trail. Though we don't have enough space here to go into the true depth of the stranger side of the Templars, the sheer variety of the possibilities should provide the foundation of understanding that will help with our knowledge of the Freemasons.

A great deal of the attention paid to this particular moment in time has focused on the very nature of the Templars' wealth. While certain people are content to understand this wealth in purely financial terms, others have suggested that there was something far more interesting being hidden by the Templars. How, they suggest, did such a small band of poor knights rise to power so quickly? How did they gain such legislative immunity from the church? The answer to this, it is suggested, goes all the way back to Temple Mount. It has been suggested that the Templars first home in Jerusalem was far more than just an administrative branch. When awarded the offices in the buildings on the holy spot, the Templars began digging. While excavating the site, they found… something. The exact nature of what they may have found remains just as contested as the idea of whether or not they found anything at all. This find has been proposed as everything from a statue of Baphomet imbued with dark magical powers, to the Ark of the Covenant (in which was stored the original tablets bearing the Ten Commandments), or even the Holy Grail. Even the nature of the latter is contended, from being a simple cup used at the Last Supper, to being the extensive documentation of the mortal lineage of Jesus Christ, the family he had on earth and the descendants through to the modern day. Any one of these items has been held aloft as being the key to the Templars power and the reason why they might had been

able to ascend to such an important position so quickly.

Trying to figure out not only what happened to the Knights Templar, but what secrets they guarded, has taken up the life of many a historian. But how exactly does it relate to the Freemasons? In order to understand that, we will have to take what we have learned about the Knights Templar and look ahead a few years to the state of England in the 14 th Century.

The Peasants' Revolt

After Edward II came Edward III. The formers reign was considered something of a disaster. Continued disagreements between many high ranking barons and other noblemen plagued his time as king. In particular, his relationship with a man named Piers Gaveston caused uproar throughout the kingdom. It is unknown exactly what about this relationship caused controversy, but it was enough to cause legislative chaos and a constant struggle for power. Eventually, Gaveston was caught and executed by the barons. This caused an extended period of conflict, with the barons basing themselves in Scotland. Edward II fought against them, trying to quell problems in his own kingdom and a long-standing dispute with Scotland itself. To further complicate matters, Gaveston had also managed to provoke France's ire, meaning that his relationship with the King had caused issues on two important fronts. Eventually, the barons' fight with Edward led to the English King being defeated in battle by a Scot named Robert the Bruce in 1314. The defeat left a lasting impact, the aftershocks being felt in the form of famine and strife in much of England. Criticism of the King abounded.

Edward II seemed unable to satiate his critics. After a protracted disagreement—involving betrayals, legislation, and executions—with the Scottish, he was forced into signing a peace treaty with Robert the Bruce. A similarly embarrassing problem was emerging in his dealings with France when—in 1325 —Edward had dispatched his wife Isabella to France to negotiate a peace. It was thought Isabella would be the perfect candidate. After all, she was a daughter of the French King, a woman whom Edward had married specifically to make peace. When she was sent to France, however, she refused to return, and also refused to negotiate a peace with her homeland. Instead, she sought out an ally and mounted an invasion of her adopted homeland. In 1326, with an army at her back, Isabella and her alliance succeeded in waging war on Edward II. The King, fearing for his life, caught between belligerents to the south and to the north, fled to the west. He took refuge in Wales but was captured a few months later. He was forced to give up his crown, resulting in his unpopular reign coming to an end

in January 1327, passing the crown on to Edward III, his fourteen year old son. Barely a year later, the former king died under mysterious circumstances, likely murdered on the instruction of the new rulers.

Despite his young age, Edward III's reign was much more successful. Though he took the crown in 1327, he ruled until 1377. For fifty years, Edward III fought to assert England as a key player in European politics. Though the former ruler had marginalized the country's influence, the new king increased the power of England's military. He fought long and hard against France, beginning the so-called Hundred Years War and seeing great victories for his country. At home, however, not everything was quite as successful. The emergence of the Black Death, a plague which swept through the country, left many thousands dead, and entire towns and villages suddenly decimated. In his later years, his health would similarly suffer. By the later 14 th Century, his ability to govern was hampered by ill health and, in 1377, he died from a stroke. The crown was passed to Richard II, the king's ten year old grandson, whose own father had died the year before.

So why are we going through all of this in a book about the Freemasons? The turmoil of England in the 14 th Century serves to distract the eye from the strangeness of the disappearance of the Knights Templar. By the time Richard II took the throne, it seemed that the Templars were long forgotten. With a new young king on the throne, with England now a major political power, and with France and Scotland seemingly quelled to the point of no longer being an existential threat, it seemed England might be set up to enjoy a prolonged period of success. But it was not to be.

In a pre-Reformation age, the Catholic Church was one of the world's only true international organizations and held some degree of power in almost every community across Europe. This was true of England and the Church was not innocent of the corruption and greed which prompted the peasants' anger. This inherent conflict–between being a force for good and being prone to corruption–reflected a similar contradiction which would have been held by the exiled Knights Templar. The Templars had originally been a Catholic militant organization, a projection of the church's own military power. But then they had been condemned and convicted by the very organization they had sworn to protect. In the opinion of some scholars, it was this decree from the Vatican that broke the bonds of allegiance between the church and the Templars. Following their exile, the Templars found themselves without a master. They were free to take whichever side they wanted.

But the Church itself was divided. In 1377, the temporary home of the pope in Avignon was abandoned. Pope Gregory XI returned the home of the Church to Rome, to the consternation of many of his cardinals. Since moving to France and drawing closer to the same French monarchy which had outlawed the Knights Templar, the Catholic Church had taken on a French flavor. The move back to Italy was unpopular among the French contingent. When Gregory died and a new pope was elected, riots in the streets of Rome influenced the decision to place an Italian on the highest seat in Christendom. Even though Pope Urban VI promised to keep the base of the church in the Vatican, the French priests disagreed. What followed was–at that point–the greatest schism in the church's history. Known as the Great Schism, the church split into two separate camps in 1378. Alongside the Vatican's Pope

Urban VI in Rome, the French Cardinals elected their own Pope, Clement VII, to rule from Avignon. Along with the support of the various cardinals, countries began to take sides. With Clement VII went France, Scotland, Portugal, Spain, and various German principalities. With Urban VI went England, Poland, Hungary, most of Holy Roman Empire, and those who would be considered enemies of France, perhaps the most powerful country in Europe at the time. Each camp ex-communicated the priests of the other and proclaimed itself the one true church.

So France and England were fighting a conventional war. They were simultaneously taking opposite sides on a spiritual conflict. They needed funds and needed them quickly. In England, this meant the poll tax of 1377.

In 1381, the introduction of a poll tax caused uproar. The peasantry was furious. The common people had been at odds with the powerful land owners for years, their position changed by the ravages of the Black Death. The power of the barons had increased under previous kings, but the destructive nature of the Black Death had drastically reduced the work force. As many as a third of the population had died. The resulting famines took even more. As such, the peasants found their skills in greater demand and their negotiating position greatly improved. While the peasants sought to take advantage of this morbid situation, the increases in their wages came at the expense of those who owned the land. Since these landowners were now in possession of a greater amount of power, they conspired to pass laws which would limit the amount they paid to peasants. Wages were driven back down to the levels they had been before the plague. Furthermore, details of peasants' lineages were taken and an effort made to bind people permanently to a particular lord. Serfdom was being further made into law. Tensions began to boil over.

Inherent grievances came to a head in the late spring of 1381 when rebellion broke out in Kent and Essex. It would eventually come to be known as the Peasants Revolt. Led by Wat Tyler and others, the peasants began to gather in massive groups. They demonstrated, going so far as to burn down Savoy Palace and kill members of the King's court. They wanted the abolition of serfdom, the feudal means of governance which saw the poor workers beholden to the whims of whatever person happened to own the land on

which they lived. The King and his court would retreat to the Tower of London and quickly realize that they did not have the strength to fight thousands of peasants. They would have to negotiate.

The King's position was weak. Not only was he just fourteen years old and dependent on the advice of his inner circle, but his kingdom was not as financially secure as he might have hoped. The wars of his grandfather, while succeeding in establishing England as a military power, had been costly. Funds had been drained. To make matters worse, the emergence of such a young king seemed to have encouraged corruption among the court. In response, the crown had decreed a number of new and insidious taxes, levelled again against the peasants. It was one of these–the poll tax–which had been one of the catalysts of the rebellion. Just as much as the barons and landowners, the king and his lack of funds were at fault. Desperate for money, facing strife on every side, England had erupted into rebellion. To complicate matters, it seemed as though there had been some degree of planning behind it.

It's often been suggested that the Peasants' Revolt was far from spontaneous. The various whisperings of rebellion and revolt were encouraged throughout the country, as the different strands of consternation facing the authorities began to come together at once. Men like John Ball, the leader of a band of priests who sided with the poor and the helpless, fanned the flames of revolt throughout the country. As the different communities across the country were told to rise up, as many as 100,000 peasants gathered to show their dissatisfaction with the crown.

Some of the first signs of such revolt came when tax gatherers were beaten up as they went about their duties. When a local lord attempted to forcibly collect his taxes and attempted to have a crowd of a hundred defying peasants arrested, the officers were attacked and the lord was lucky to escape away to London. When the government responded by sending an even bigger force to quell the issue, the gathering masses attacked with a renewed vigor. Prosecutors were not only captured, but beheaded. First taking place in Essex, similar events happened in Kent and the areas surrounding London. The mob began to swell in numbers, with people coming from villages and

towns across the country to march against the king.

Among this mob of thousands, one man seemed to emerge as the leader. Without much provocation, many quickly began to turn to a man named Walter (or Wat) Tyler for instruction. The revolt even took his name, with many people knowing the movement as Wat Tyler's Revolt. But very little is known of the man, of where he came from or what his specific grievance had been. Why had so many thousands of men suddenly accepted him as their leader? It is difficult to say, though some have taken this to be a signal of a greater level of background understanding than is perhaps clear in this day and age.

As Wat Tyler and his men moved through Canterbury, beheading "traitors" along their way, similar civic upheaval in Essex followed. On the same day that Tyler and his men were attending a huge mass in Canterbury Cathedral, the men of Essex were burning down an important building belonging to the Knights Hospitallers. The building was significant. It had originally belonged to the Knights Templar, given to them in 1138 by a royal decree. During the time when the Templars were outlawed and chased from Christendom, it had fallen into the possession of the Hospitallers. Indeed, the Hospitallers were one of the chief beneficiaries of the move to prosecute the Templars, taking on many of their holdings and assets, and assuming a large portion of their wealth. Over the coming days, many of the Hospitallers most important buildings and dwellings would be attacked by the rebels, seemingly as part of a wider social upheaval, though proportionally far more than any other group. Could it be a coincidence that the guiding hand of the rebels was so keen to attack the sworn enemy of the Knights Templar? It is here that we start to see the linking of the threads, the narratives moving that had been in place since the Crusades centuries before.

On the 11 th of June, both bands of rebels decided to turn and march on the capital. By this time, their combined numbers totaled more than 100,000. Despite being far apart and a seemingly untrained bunch, historians were impressed by the resolve and discipline demonstrated by the rioters. It was a seventy mile journey and it took just two days, with both groups arriving generally at the same time. It is easy to see why so many people have

suggested that this movement was pre-planned, rather than the product of random happenstance.

It was at this point that the teenage king retreated into the Tower of London. He took with him his most trusted advisors, those men who he could rely upon to assist him in making judgements. Among their number were the Archbishop of Canterbury and the king's treasurer, who happened to be a member of the Hospitallers. In addition, there was a man named Henry Bolingbroke, who would eventually become famous as the future King of England. With them were earls, barons, and other assorted members of the aristocracy, all of whom had something to fear from the suddenly malignant peasants.

By the 12 th of June, the rebels were massing in what is now East London. They marched across the river, moving through Southwark. From across London, more and more people began to join them. As rebellious groups formed in different parts of the city, they took it upon themselves to sack and burn palaces, with particular attention paid to the records kept by the aristocracy, records of lineage and genealogy which were used to bind peasants to serfdom. The prisons were attacked and all inside turned loose.

From inside the Tower of London, the young king could see the smoke rising up from his city. In response, he sent out messengers to the rebels, asking what they wanted. The response he received informed him that the rebels sought, in fact, to save the king. They wanted to free him from the band of traitors who had surrounded him and dedicated themselves to destroying the country. The king asked for a meeting, pleading with the rebels to halt their sacking of the city so as he might be able to hear their complaints in full.

The rebels agreed. They moved to the river, the men from Kent stationed on the south side and the men from Essex on the north side. The king set off from the Tower of London on his royal barge, slowing drifting down the river to meet with the rebels. It was halfway through his journey that his advisors were finally able to persuade him to stop. As it became apparent that the king had halted, the rebels sent out their demands directly to the barge. Firstly, there was a list of men who must be executed. Many of the men on the list

were on the royal barge at that very moment, including the prior of the Hospitallers and the Archbishop of Canterbury. As might be expected, the king’s council advised against such a move. From the shore, the rebels could see the king’s barge turn around and head back towards the Tower.

The rebels entered the city proper. By some mysterious stroke of fortune, neither gate they moved to happened to be guarded. Unhindered, they walked straight through. Refraining from sacking and destroying everything in their path, they instead marched straight to Fleet Street, an important part of London which happened to contain a prison. They attacked, freeing all the men inside.

Nearby were two forges, places which had once belonged to the Knights Templar. They were now being run by the Hospitallers. Just as before, the rebels turned their ire on the forges and destroyed both of them. As they then marched through the city to the Savoy Palace, the mob only stopped to attack any building which they were able to certify as belonging to the Hospitallers. They destroyed many buildings, but few suffered the wrath of the mob quite so much as the Savoy Palace. Art works, furniture, tapestries, and many other valuable items were destroyed beyond repair. After they were finished, the rebels set fire to the palace, aiding the process by ensuring a number of gunpowder kegs were first moved inside.

Once Savoy Palace was destroyed, the band of rebels again seemed to turn their attentions to buildings which might be owned and operated by the Knights Hospitaller. Any such property between the Thames and Fleet Street was vandalized and then burned. Records were set afire and any lawyers who might try to stop the crowd were killed. The one Hospitaller property which seemed to escape much of the destruction was a small church. However, the rebels still went inside and fetched any records they could find. These were burned in the street. It was perhaps no coincidence that this church had also previously been the property of the Knights Templar. It was one of the only targeted buildings not completely destroyed. When compared to the Hospitaller headquarters in Clerkenwell, a building which was damaged beyond all repair, it seems something of a miracle that the Templars' former church should escape so lightly.

The rebels continued their campaign. They moved across the city, freeing prisoners and burning records, paying special attention to Hospitaller properties. One group, after trying to petition the Tower of London for an

audience with the king, found themselves denied. In response, they lay siege to the Tower. That it was perhaps the most defensible building anywhere in England did not seem to concern them.

Throughout the city, it was announced that being a member of the Exchequer or the Chancery (two of the country's tax collecting authorities) was enough to condemn a man to death. When seeking evidence of such a crime, the presence of ink on a man's fingers was proof enough of his guilt. Seeing as the vast majority of literate men had received their education from the church, it was no coincidence that a large portion of the dead were members of the clergy.

The king seemed to be shocked. So far, he had no response to the uprising. Lacking an army to combat such a massive rebel gathering, the money to pay off the crowds, or the preparation time required to deal with such a well-ordered rebellion, the king was at a loss as to how to respond. Rather than a show of force or strength, he would have to rely on tricking his enemies. On the 14 th of June, it was announced that the king would agree to meet with the rebel leaders, with a view to giving in to all of their demands. The message was given to town criers across the city and proclaimed for all to hear.

As a meeting place, the king and his advisors selected Mile End, a place with open fields which just happened to be outside the walls of the city. The aim was to draw the rebels out of the city first and foremost. This was mostly achieved, with a large number of the forces following the king out beyond the city walls. But not everyone went. Wat Tyler and a few hundred men hung around in the city, armed with a plan of their own.

Even on the morning of the planned meeting, all was not right in the king's camp. Before they had set off to meet the rebels, the Archbishop of Canterbury had been caught attempting to take a boat and escape down to the Thames. People along the banks recognized him and the resulting outcry and abuse from the river banks forced the oarsmen to turn around and retreat to the Tower.

The king set off for the meeting, taking along his trusted advisors. While the

records make sure to list the people who accompanied him, they are silent on those members of the court who did not. In particular, Sir Simon Sudbury and Sir Robert Hales are not mentioned. That is to say, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the prior of the Knights Hospitaller. Whether they chose to stay in the Tower or were ordered to do so is not clear. Neither is there any mention of who took on the role of leader in the rebel camp that day, while the most notorious leaders—men such as Wat Tyler and John Ball–remained in the city with some secret agenda.

At first, it seemed as though the meeting in Mile End would go well. There were two demands from the rebels. First, that they should be permitted to hunt down and kill anyone they deemed to be a traitor to the king and the people. The second request was that the system of serfdom be abandoned, with every Englishman being a ‘free man.’ The king’s response seemed reasonable. To the first request, he agreed that ‘traitors’ should be executed, but only provided they were judged to be guilty in a court of law. To the second request, he turned to a crowd of thirty clerks who had come with him, especially designed to draft legislature in quick measure.

But while the meeting between the rebels and the king seemed to be going well, events inside the city played out regardless. The rebel leaders struck. Wat Tyler and his men had planned to attack and hold the Tower of London itself. An ambitious goal in the best of times, let alone with only a few hundred scantily armed rebels. Already the most fortified building in the country, the Tower was being guarded by hundreds of professional soldiers. There was a drawbridge, a portcullis, and a heavy gate, not to mention the sheer range of weapons possessed by those inside. Furthermore, the troops in the Tower had Robert Hales, prior of the Knights Hospitaller and a proven battle commander, to instruct them.

Nevertheless, Tyler and his men attacked. As it happened, it seemed as though the rebels had a man on the inside. When the rebels arrived, they discovered that the drawbridge was already down. The portcullis had been lifted. The gate was open. The rebels strode into the Tower of London and the historians struggle to note so much as an angry word as they did so.

Now having gained entry to the Tower, the rebels moved to capture their foes. The Archbishop of Canterbury was their first target and they found him in the chapel. Dragging him out into the open air, they beat him and threw him to the floor. At the same time, another group arrived with the similarly disarmed Hospitaller. The two men were held in place while the rebels searched the tower for other men on their list; tax collectors, lords, and the like. Once the rebels had everyone they wanted, they dragged the men to Tower Hill. In front of a baying public, they sliced off the head of each of the men. The severed heads were taken and placed on poles over London Bridge for all to see. In deference to the former Archbishop of Canterbury's station, they took his distinctive mitre and nailed it to his head.

After the executions, the rebels spread out across the city. They searched for others on their list, the men who had caused them strife. In all, they found around 160 victims, all of whom they killed. Among the dead were the corrupt and the traitorous (as deemed by the rebels), as well as anyone who spoke out against them or praised the recently deceased.

Furthermore, a special dispatch was organized by Tyler. He gathered together a small group of rebels and sent them out of London, towards Highbury, with the aim of destroying a very specific building. It also belonged to the Hospitallers, having recently been renovated by the order and being deemed as one of the most ostentatious and lavish houses around.

It didn't take long for word of this attack to reach the king and the men in Mile End. The meeting was abandoned and the king fled back to his home in Castle Baynard, clearly not wanting to return to the Tower of London. All the while, the collection of clerks who had been tasked with writing up legislature carried on about their task. Before the king departed, many of the rebels had snatched up pages from the clerks, riding back to their hometowns to brandish this new royal decree.

What happened next is hazy and ill-recorded in the history books. It seems that the king agreed to meet the rebels once again, this time at Smithfield. The meeting was arranged for the next day, the 15 th of June. Before the meeting, the king attended mass at Westminster Abbey. He had been

followed to the service by a number of the rebels, curious to see what was happening. When they were there, they spotted a particularly loathsome tax collector hiding in one of the chapels. Despite the man's pleas for mercy, he was dragged out into the open air and beheaded in front of a crowd. The king finished hearing mass and departed for Smithfield.

Many rebels were already waiting for him. They had lined up along one side, while the king and his men lined up along the other. Exactly what happened next is hotly disputed in the history books. It is said that Wat Tyler was among the rebel leaders and that his fierce insults levied against the king caused much consternation, or that his behavior was deemed to be insulting to the crown in some fashion. In all likelihood, this probably just gave the king and his men the excuse they needed, allowing them to follow through with what had been the plan all the long. It happened as follows.

Standing on opposite sides of the field, the king requested the presence of the leader of the rebels. This meant Wat Tyler. To issue this request, he sent the Mayor of London himself, William Walworth, across the field. Tyler, realizing that such an audience with the king would place him far from his men and heavily outnumbered, grew suspicious. He came up with a hand signal which, if implemented, meant that the rebels should immediately attack. His orders were that, during such an attack, every member of the opposing forces should be killed, all apart from the king. Joined by just one man bearing his banner, Wat Tyler set out across the field.

It is telling that we only have government accounts of what happened next. The majority of these people, it seems, were not there. In their version of events—the only version we have–it seems as though Wat Tyler met with the king. There, he issued his list of demands once again. This time, the demands had increased. Now, Tyler wanted the church's property to be seized and the wealth distributed among the poor, he wanted numerous legal changes, and he demanded that there only be one bishop for all of England.

As Tyler worked through his list of demands in front of the king, William Walworth silently drew his dagger. Sneaking up behind the rebel leader, the mayor cut him along the neck. One of the king's squires jumped to help,

taking out a sword and stabbing Tyler two times. As the rebel tried to turn back towards his men, he fell from his horse. The wound was mortal. He would not live.

From across the field, it was not clear what had happened. The hand signal agreed before Tyler had departed had not been seen. Instead, they saw a rider set out from across the broad expanse and come towards them. It was the king, the fourteen year old boy himself. He spoke out to the rebels, telling them that he was happy to meet their demands and that they should accompany him to Clerkenwell–the place where the Hospitaller palace still burned–to seal the pact. With that, he rode off, taking his men and his army, too.

The rebels were left confused. They didn't know what to do. A few set out across the field themselves and recovered Tyler's body. He was dying, clearly, so was taken to a nearby hospital to see what could be done. After more than an hour of trying to come up with a plan, the previously well-organized rebels decided that they would follow the king's instruction. They set off for Clerkenwell.

Unbeknownst to them, anti-rebellion forces were beginning to mass. Perhaps inspired by the news of Wat Tyler's death, hundreds were gathering. The Mayor, the king, and many other authority figures sent out the call for any able bodied man to take up arms against the rebellion.

When they arrived in Clerkenwell, the rebels immediately demanded that the king hand over everyone who had been a part of Wat Tyler's murder. As the rebels protested their case to the king, the anti-rebellion mob gathered around. Slowly, without the rebels realizing who they were, these men encircled the rebels. Eventually, the leader was able to inform the king that he had the upper hand. Noting that the rebels were now heavily outnumbered and surrounded, the king demanded that they disperse, lest they be punished for their actions.

Acknowledging that the tables had turned, the rebel crowd began to break up. This time, there was little organization. They moved away in dribs and drabs,

the only truly organized group seemingly led by John Ball, the preacher, who took a band of rebels back across London Bridge. Whereas they had passed over victoriously just three days before, now they were fleeing the city.

Mayor William Walworth went looking for the rebel leader, Wat Tyler. He found Tyler in the hospital near Smithfield, his wounds being attended to by the nurses. Even though the injuries were likely mortal, Walworth was not going to take the chance. He dragged Tyler from the hospital bed and out into the street. There, like so many of the rebels' victims, Tyler had his head struck off. It was used to replace the heads of the king's men on the poles above London Bridge.

Many of the king's inner circle received knighthoods. They had helped to repel the mob from the city. But they had not entirely dealt with the problem. Outside of London, many thousands of people were still angry. The rage at the taxes and treatment of the poor was not just confined to Essex and Kent. Indeed, in the weeks before and after the Peasants' Revolt, there were incidents all across the country.

Reports from Suffolk showed that a local preacher had gathered together disgruntled locals to burn down the home of a corrupt nobleman, and chased out clergymen from a monastery that held people in the grips of serfdom. Records were burnt, wealth was plundered. The chancellor of Cambridge University was similarly executed for corruption. A group of rebels managed to take control of Nottingham Castle, marching through the open gates in an echo of what had happened in the Tower of London. Other castles were taken in this fashion, other aristocratic houses were sacked, and other people were executed. It happened up and down England. Added to this, many of the targets happened to belong to the Hospitallers.

It is clear that there was some communication and organization between the rebels. As far north as Yorkshire, almost to the same day, peasant uprisings took place. The fallout from the rebellion was huge. Across the country, the king and the authorities clamped down on even the tiniest signs of disorder and discontent. The pieces of paper that had been taken by some of the rebels from the meeting with the king were disavowed. Promises were broken,

arrests were made, and people were executed. Inquisitions were held. Not only to try to root out the rebels, but to uncover the wider web of communication hidden behind the revolt. There was clearly a suspicion that there was much more to the uprising than a simple and sudden rush of blood to the collective heads of the peasantry. Someone, people suspected, was behind all of this.

In a book about the Freemasons, you may be wondering why we have started the discussion with examples from the medieval age which have seemingly nothing to do with the Masons and their modern iterations. But the stories about secret societies go back much further than you might imagine. In looking closely at the Knights Templar and the Peasants' Revolt, we can see the shadowy operations of a clandestine organization. In order to thoroughly understand why modern masonry is such a controversial subject, we should understand its ties to these age-old events. As we will see in the next chapter, things might be more intertwined than you may have ever imagined.

The Shadow Organization

The aftermath of the Peasants' Revolt was brutal. Though most of the records and discussions of the time stem from those who had a particular interest in appealing to the king's favor, there are ways in which we can look deeper at the potential truth hidden behind the propaganda and bias. For example, the paperwork associated with the questioning and investigations by various aldermen and other state figures often turns up the mention of a strange organization. While many of the rebels admitted that they were legitimately outraged at the authorities, others happened to refer to a mysterious group which dispatched representatives and messengers, stirring up discord and helping to inspire the rebellion. This group was referred to in the records as the Great Society.

A book about the Freemasons would be remiss not to mention the Great Society. Though we have covered a lot of ground already in this history, the benefit will soon arrive. The idea is to draw a line between the earliest iterations of the Knights Templar, through to the Great Society which helped organize the Peasants' revolt, through to the emergence into wider society of the Freemasons, and then their ultimate acceptance as a part of the fabric of modern civilization. While some might suggest that this hints at a wider conspiracy theory, that one organization has been dominating the political machinations of Western society for many centuries, this is not true. Instead, the presence and importance of secret societies (of which the Freemasons are the most famous in the modern world) should be examined with great scrutiny. In order to do this, understanding why the modern Freemasons might be connected to their medieval forebears is essential. In order to continue this quest for knowledge, we should ask ourselves: who were the Great Society?

When we look back at the official account of the Peasants' Revolt, there are a few points which stand out. First, the role of the king. Though still a teenager at the time, Richard II is painted as a leader and a decisive figure. He makes decisions, inspires men, and eventually crushes the rebellion. But this flies in

the face of reality. In truth, it was not until the age of twenty three that Richard truly ruled his kingdom. Before then, it was governed mostly by an elected council of regents, an inner circle of men who acted and made decisions on the king's behalf. Unofficial descriptions of Richard that have passed down tell us of a rather weak-willed, stammering teenager. Definitely not the sort of boy to have ridden up to a rebel army and spoken confidently to them after cutting down their leader.

Second, the role of the Tower of London is somewhat suspect. It was the easiest place in England to defend, especially against a small band of rebels. Why was it so easy for Wat Tyler to simply stroll in with a small group of men? Why did he not bother holding it himself as a headquarters after making his executions? Why bother taking it at all if the meeting with the king held any chance of resolving the rebels' issues? It seems more as though the point of the meeting with the king at Mile End was to remove the king from the city, rather than the rebels. This then opened up the Tower for the attack from Tyler, the rebel leader who didn't even bother to attend the meeting with the king. Could it be that the attack on the Tower was the true objective?

A third point, and in a similar vein; why were key members of the king's council left behind in the Tower for the rebels to execute? The Archbishop of Canterbury being left behind is perhaps understandable, seeing as he had tried to flee the Tower using a boat that very morning. But Robert Hales being left in the Tower is much more difficult to explain. As the prior of the Knights Hospitallers, Hales was not only an experienced battle commander and one of the best fighters in the kingdom, but he was the man who should naturally have been chosen to accompany the king while he met with a great threat to the kingdom. Hales had fought in the latest Crusade with great success. He was head of a military order of monastic knights. He was known throughout the kingdom as a fearsome man and a fine soldier. Why leave such a man behind?

There are just so many questions. Why did the king not return to the tower following the meeting with the rebels? Was it a coincidence that his household servants and staff happened to be in place already? We come back

again to the idea that it was the king's council of regents, rather than the king himself who made these decisions. They likely arranged such matters beforehand and simply led Richard around.

It also helps to look at the king's role in the aftermath of the rebellion. For many, royal pardons were issued. Towns which had played host to the rebels were issued an amnesty, allowing them to return to their business and for the matter to be forgotten. But it did not apply to everyone. There were 287 men specifically named as being excluded from the amnesty. Apart from those on the list who already happened to be in prison following the crackdown on the rebels, the other men simply vanished. They do not appear again in the record books. Men such as Henry de Newark and Richard de Melton were named on the list of the 287, as well as being mentioned in a royal writ that was issued on the 10 th of December, 1381, wanted for the role they had played in riots in Beverly. The response from the local government was that the men were simply not to be found anywhere in the area. They had vanished.

As such, the natural follow up question is to ask where they went. In a time when movement between towns and cities was much more difficult and much less practiced, the disappearance of people outside a local sphere of influence was a much bigger deal. The fact that these men were just a few examples, that it was the same story for many of the men on the list of the 287, seems strange in and of itself. Some historians have drawn a parallel between the vanishing of these rioters and the vanishing of the Knights Templar seventy years beforehand. The two groups are similar: recently condemned by the authorities, wanted by the government and the church both, and suddenly in desperate need of shelter, food, and somewhere to hide. For so many men to suddenly find refuge with such skill seems indicative of a pre-planned escape mechanism, perhaps the existence of safe houses and bolt holes ready for those men who would inevitably draw the government's ire. This support, it has been suggested, was provided by the so-called Great Society.

At the same time, the reaction of the church was telling. Despite the fact that the rebels cut off the head of the Archbishop of Canterbury, his replacement was not concerned with direct retribution. Instead, the church launched a campaign against heresy, the very same crime which the authorities accused

the Templars of committing seven decades earlier. But the true impact of the rebellion on the church would not be felt for a while yet. It was the seeds of doubt and resentment which emerged during the Revolt that would later flower in full during the Protestant Reformation.

But, as mentioned before, the biggest mystery of the Peasants' Revolt is undoubtedly the shadow organization that seemed to be at work arranging things and colluding behind the scenes. That there was some level of secret organization happening behind the rebellion seems to be a fact agreed upon by most historians, though they differ on the exact details and scope of the mystery group. Furthermore, one of the main questions is whether such an organization was acting in direct response to the political situation of 1381, or was in fact a pre-existing body that had begun to act in response to grudges and agendas held for many hundreds of years? To put it simply, was the organization a one off response or an already established group? Could the 287 men absent from the amnesty have been suspected members of the group? Could this mysterious shadow organization have actually been the lingering remains of the Knights Templar, who had been in hiding for seventy years?

All indications point to the fact that such a large scale organized response to the government must have taken a great deal of planning. Thanks to recovered documents from sheriffs and bailiffs, we know that the authorities believed that meetings had been held in secret in the months leading up to June. This would have required a great deal of effort. Establishing a network of trustworthy people, vetting members, and deciding upon agendas and meeting places is tough, even when limited to a single geographic spot. Trying to do the same across all of medieval England would be incredibly difficult.

As it stands, the organization behind the Peasants' Revolt needed to be disciplined, clever, motivated, and prepared. Such a secret society, one which knew how to erect and maintain a means of clandestine communication across the country without being caught, seems to have been out of the reach of the average peasant. Even working in groups of two or three towns, the means and resources available to the average working man would likely have

been far from enough to accomplish such a task. Add in the fact that the majority of the peasants were illiterate and the true scope of such an organization begins to become apparent.

It should also be mentioned that, as hard as any such organization would be working to keep itself secret, there would be those who were working to uncover them. Spies, traitors, and double agents were not out of the question. In response, secret signals are used. These could be gestures, pre-arranged conversation cues, or mannerisms. The important part is that, in a society working across England, when messengers and agents do not know one another, such a system much be standardized. Again, this shows a level of resources and skill above the typical rebellion.

However, in a time when it is easy to read many sprawling conspiracy theories and often overreaching ideas of what a secret society might be capable of achieving, it should be noted that the Peasants' Revolt was not entirely orchestrated by the Great Society. There were a great many social and political motivations for the uprising. The most obvious of these is the Black Death and its aftereffects. The effect the Plague had on the labor market was one of the driving forces of the rebellion and it would be intellectually dishonest to suggest something like the idea that an organization purposefully introduced an epidemic into the country to create the conditions for a revolt. Nor could they have been responsible for the corruption and attitude of the church, nor the taxes and laws created by the king's government.

Instead, the organizing hand behind the Peasants' Revolt seems to have seen these conditions and opportunistically seized upon them when stoking the fires of rebellion. Taking old issues and grievances among the people, they articulated and voiced such problems for all to hear. They focused blame and anger, directing it toward their own goals. The fact that Wat Tyler was killed before the Revolt could truly fulfil its goals likely means that we will never know what this mysterious leader and his organization truly wanted. We do know that the guiding hand of the rebellion seemed to die with him, with the organizers shrinking back into the shadows.

So where does this leave us? Though we suspect that the existence of the so-called Great Society was certainly true, we have close to seven centuries separating us from the reality. Furthermore, the quest to uncover evidence is difficult. Not only have just a fraction of the documents from the time even survived into the present day, but those that did are often written from the perspective of the authorities. As we have seen, the secret society in question was adept at hiding itself from the government. Those of us who are searching seven hundred years later are already at a huge disadvantage. Rather than proof of the Great Society itself, we see the imprint of the organization. We see the foot print, rather than the foot itself. We can interpret their existence based on the circumstances, the environment, and the government's response, rather than any one piece of brilliant evidence. There is no smoking gun. There is not even a reference to a single Great Society, the sources refuse to use 'the' as the definitive article, instead mentioning 'a' Great Society. We only use the label of the Great Society due to the fact that we have no better name.

Furthermore, trying to prove the existence of a secret society seems to be a contradiction in terms. To be truly secret and truly successful, a secret society would not be known to anyone else but members. That is perhaps why there is no official record of any kind of secret society anywhere in medieval England, other than the Lollards (whose work is only tangentially related to this matter).

And now, at least—and somewhat briefly—we come to the Ancient Order of the Free and Accepted Masons. From the outset, we should state that there is no contemporary documentation that confirms the operation of the Freemasons in England during the rebellion. Equally, no evidence exists to the contrary, though the burden of proof remains on the former position. Instead, the evidence linking the Freemasons with the uprising comes from a few years later.

After 1717, there was a shift in the way the Masons operated. As we will go into detail later on, they moved out of the shadows and became a public organization. It is after this time that the Freemasons exist as a verifiable group. But that has not prevented people who have been writing about the

Freemasons to trace the lineage back even further. A cursory internet search or a glimpse through a number of the less-thoroughly researched books on the matter will list men such as Pythagoras, Julius Caesar, and other historical figures as being members of the order, or perhaps even Grandmasters. These are often flights of fancy, with little to link the speculation to reality. Such matters are hardly worth mentioning, beyond acknowledging their speculative existence. Other, slightly more tempered suggestions, have put forward men such as King Solomon (the man who built on Temple Mount) and that his temple was the first edifice dedicated to Masonry. More modern historians have labelled this an equal flight of fancy. However, that is not to say that the lineage of the Freemasons cannot be traced back to many centuries before the time when they first emerged into public view.

For many historians, the roots of the organization now known as the Freemasons can be traced to the medieval times. During this period, it has been suggested that stone masons and other professionals banded together in guilds (a verifiable fact) and that these guilds then transformed into secret societies. This is one of the most commonly accepted versions of the origin of the Freemasons. One only need look at the name to see the clear etymological link between a guild of masons and the Freemasons. So how does this relate to the Peasants' Revolt and the Great Society that may have organized it all?

Historians have pointed first to the alleged leader of the rebels, Walter the Tyler (to give him his full name.) As was the case in many professions handed down from father to son in England at the time, the surname of a man (typically using the additional 'the') would be an indication of his profession. In an age when a profession might stay in a family for years and communities would be relatively small, such names were important. Though their modern versions have been divorced from such professional qualities, one need only look at the surname of Wat Tyler to note that he was likely a tradesman, or had at least come from a family of trades-orientated tylers (tilers).

Wat Tyler is a fascinating figure in English history. Seemingly from nowhere, he emerges to lead one of the country's largest ever rebellions, leading 100,000 peasants in a march against the aristocracy. He destroys

many properties (including many belonging to the Hospitallers), burns many records, and executes many people (including both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the prior of the Knights Hospitallers). Just as quickly as he appears on the scene, he departs. A few days after becoming one of the most important people in the entire kingdom, he is executed and his head stuck on a pole over London Bridge. In all, his time in the spotlight lasted about eight days. Before then, we know nothing of the man. After, he becomes a legend.

As such, there have been suggestions that Wat Tyler might have been using a false name. Though his name might suggest a history as a roof tiler, his clear military acumen and leadership qualities seem to render this redundant. Instead, it could be that he chose the name 'Tyler' on purpose, wishing to indicate his position and his importance to those who knew the relevance of the name.

At this point, we will make a detour into Masonic law. For those who are unfamiliar, a Masonic Lodge as an organization is a well-defined structure. Within each lodge there are specific titles relating to specific roles and jobs. The name Tyler is one such title. Within the context of a Masonic Lodge, the man who has the title of Tyler is considered the sentry and the enforcer, the sergeant-at-arms of his respective Lodge. It is his responsibility to screen potential members, to check their credentials, to ensure that the meeting place is secure, and then—while the meeting takes place—to stand guard outside the room while holding a drawn sword. In modern parlance, it is essentially a ceremonial position. In the secret societies of old, at a time when they existed outside of (and often in opposition to) the law, it was an essential post. The name Tyler, to Masons, means something incredibly specific.

Therefore, if were are to entertain the idea that there might be a link (any at all) between the Great Society and the group who would eventually become the Freemasons, we can understand that the name Wat the Tyler was far more than a random pseudonym. To those in the know, the emergence of Wat Tyler at the head of the rebellion would have been a secret sign, a signal that this was an ordained military leader, the man who would hold the sword and deliver discipline and military success. The connection is tenuous, certainly speculative, but it is interesting nonetheless.

On a similar level is the idea that Yorkshire was an important center of the uprising, especially in the city of York itself. The city has long played an important role in Masonry, with Masons as recently as the 18 th Century being certain of the idea that the York Lodge is the oldest in the country. The founding of the Lodge, they say, dates back to the construction of York Cathedral in medieval times. Over the course of the 18 th Century, the York Lodge would play a key role in Freemasonry. Annoyed at the decision of London Lodges to go public with their existence in 1717, they spent the next decade distancing themselves from their southern brothers and asserting their right to stand alone, an importance and a privilege they suggest has been incumbent to the York Lodge since "time immemorial." Added to this, the special position of York with regards to Freemasonry is demonstrated by the modern belief—especially among American Masons—that the York branch of Masonry is the most authentic, most in tune with Masonic traditions.

There's no denying that the rebellion was certainly ideologically similar to many Masonic principles. Looking at the Revolt on a macro level, the rejection of serfdom, the determination to be free, and to throw of the shackles of domineering power relationships is very much in line with many ideas held aloft by the Masons. Indeed, one of the central concepts of the order—known as the Landmarks of Freemasonry—requires that a Mason be a "free man born of a free mother." Serfdom, seemingly, would prohibit this. Indeed, the fact that—by the close of the 15 th Century—almost every man (at least, every white English male) in England could be considered "free" has been used by some to indicate that the very existence of such a requirement points to the idea that Masonry as a concept is very old. That the Peasants' Revolt was perhaps a demonstration in favor of Masonic ideals, however, is not proof that any Great Society could be considered a forebear or an early iteration of the Freemasons. It does, however, help add color to the argument that the Masons may have existed (and held influence) long before the time that is most commonly accepted.

Perhaps the strongest evidence tying our various strands together is best demonstrated by looking at another society altogether. The key to understanding the potential earliest glimpses of a Masonic secret society could well be demonstrated through the existence of the Knights Hospitallers. The numerous attacks of the rebels on Hospitaller properties and the execution of their prior (or leader), Sir Robert Hales, is very telling. Take, for example, George de Donesby. Despite being from Lincolnshire, he was eventually arrested some 200 miles from his home and did indeed confess to being a member of the so-called Great Society. The coincidence here is that the striking peasants back in his home town were particularly distraught at the behavior of their local lords and had stopped paying taxes, taxes which would have eventually ended up in a manor controlled by the Hospitallers. He is one of the few men who can be directly tied to the existence of the Great Society and also possessed clear structural resentment of the Knights Hospitallers.

Of course, the string of attacks by the rioters on Hospitaller properties demonstrates that this was clearly an agenda driven process. For example, taking the rioters especially north of London into Highbury in order to burn down the Hospitallers' newly rebuilt manor is a clear indication that they were to be considered a natural enemy of the rioters. In the middle of London, surrounded by a litany of potential targets, the rebels went six miles out of their way to attack Hospitaller property. Similar examples can be found across the country, where rioters made special dispensation to target such properties. In Cambridge, for example, men rode ten miles from their path to burn another Hospitaller manor.

It has long been held that the Peasants' Revolt was partly a demonstration against the corrupt nature of the church. In so far as this is true, the rebels certainly targeted churches and religious buildings in their attacks, particularly when they were burning records which might be used by the government in propagating serfdom. But the churches that they did attack were disproportionally owned and operated by the Hospitallers. It was only the properties that were owned by these Knights that the rebels purposefully sought out and burned down. Other attacks were often sporadic crimes of

opportunity. Very rarely did the rebels deviate from their set path other than to attack Hospitaller properties.

Indeed, the one church which the rebels did not seem to want to burn down was the Hospitaller church just off Fleet Street. Instead, they took all of the available records out from the building and burned them in the street. Was it a coincidence that this same property had previously been one of the Knights Templars' favored properties? Might there have been a wish to preserve this church over all others, despite the presence of the Hospitallers? The church had been consecrated in 1185 by Heraclius, the then-patriarch of the holy city of Jerusalem in the name of the Knights Templar. The same patriarch similarly consecrated the Hospitallers' property in Clerkenwell, but—perhaps as that property had not previously been owned by the Templars—the rebels had no issue with burning it down. Could it have been a coincidence that the attacks by the rebels were so clearly aimed towards one of the oldest enemies of the Knights Templar? Could this have been an act of vengeance from a group which had seemingly been driven underground and out of existence?

Even small touches, such as the choice of uniform among many of the rebels, points towards a Templar influence. In places such as Scarborough, Beverly, and York, the rebels attired themselves in a white shawl, hooded and with a red decorative touch. Not only does such an item indicate planning—it would have been hard to make 500 of these on the spot and distribute them over long distances—but it was remarkably similar to the choice of clothing worn by the Templars themselves, a white mantle with a red cross.

One of the most interesting links comes from the death of Jack Strawe. Strawe was one of the highest ranking members of the rebel army, something of a right hand man to Wat Tyler. He was caught and taken to London, whereupon he was sentenced to death for his crimes of helping to organize a rebellion. The authorities still tried to extract a confession from the man, however, and in exchange offered Strawe the chance of a Christian burial and the promise that three years' of masses would be said in his name. All he had to do was to confess the "true purpose" of the rebellion. Strawe agreed and gave the authorities a statement. In this statement, he confirmed that the plan was not only to assemble a massive crowd of common people and to execute

any lords who opposed them, but to destroy the Hospitallers. Not just their property, but their organization. This hatred was left unexplained, but there seems to be only one logical answer to those who ask this question—just who could have hated the Hospitallers to such a degree?

It was a hatred that had been brewing for decades. Ever since the official disbanding of the Knights Templar in 1312, following the five years of torture and investigation by numerous institutions, there had been the question of what should be done with the Templars' extensive business portfolio. Many of those interested in breaking up the Templars wanted the wealth for themselves—and they took it —but one of the chief beneficiaries was the Knights Hospitaller. It's easy to see why a group who had been hounded and chased into secrecy might resent and loathe one of their chief rivals. Would this have been the motivation behind the destruction of Hospitaller property and the execution of the grand prior of the order, Robert Hales? Could the Templars have had a similar grudge against the Catholic Church—the same organization which had founded and then abandoned them —to the point where they ignored the Holy Sacrament, ignored ancient rites of sanctuary, and even executed the Archbishop of Canterbury? It's obvious that the Templars might have resented both institutions and that the Revolt provided them with the opportunity to extract some kind of revenge.

Indeed, there seems even to be a direct reference to the Templars in the chronicles taken from Bury St. Edmunds. One of the most bloody sites of the Revolt, it was specifically excluded from the amnesty. When digging into the records from the time, Antonia Gransden's book highlights the ire that might have been raised by the Templars. The chronicles repurpose some of the Templars' most heroic and notable tales, with the Benedictine authors turning the Knights into treasonous men rather than tragic heroes. The accounts even go so far as to accuse the Templars of poisoning the King of Cyprus and his family. It would be enough to prompt a hidden Templar force into anger and hints at the propaganda campaign that was issued following the Templars' demise. As the source of some of the more extreme lies about the Templars, Bury St. Edmunds might well have had the violence brought upon the town through the actions of the Benedictine monks.

All of this supposition brings us to one important question. Though the Peasants' Revolt is commonly regarded as a failure, is this actually true? If indeed there was a Great Society—which might have been the descendants of the Knights Templar—providing guidance, expertise, and motivation, was the Revolt actually a success for those behind the scenes?

If we take the point of view of the so-called Great Society and assume that they bore some connection to the Templars, then was the destruction of Hospitaller, Crown, and Church property actually one of the major goals of the rebellion? If so, then there was more than a modicum of success to be enjoyed. Destroying vast amounts of valuable properties, destroying records, and removing wealth from the noted enemies of the Templars would certainly indicate that the Revolt could have been a success from the Templar point of view.

But this is difficult to believe. If we are to entertain the idea that the Templars were themselves the Great Society—or at least, that they formed its foundational layer—then we must wonder how an order than had been either destroyed or driven underground for sixty-nine years could possibly have been so influential. As well as having many of their most important commanders executed during the purge against the Templars, those knights who were members of the order would have aged drastically. Those aged twenty, for example, would be approaching ninety years by the time of the Revolt. They would have had to have been lower ranking members, at the very least. It seems implausible that members such as these would be able to live long enough to inspire a rebellion (especially if we discount more wild propositions, such as the Templars' ownership of the Holy Grail and any attendant life-extending properties such an item might possess).

Likewise, the idea that the Templars could perpetuate themselves in secret over a number of future generations, still maintaining that initial lust for revenge, seems just as unlikely. Could such a society remain secret in England for close to seventy years, positioning itself to take advantage of certain societal changes and alterations that would eventually lead to the Peasants' Revolt?

Stepping back from the intricacies of the story for a moment, we can look at the facts:

- There was likely a group (loosely structured) of people who sympathized with the Templars in England around the time of their disbandment. This is seen in the larger numbers of members who managed to evade capture in England compared to other countries. When the crown and the church later worked together to find remaining Templars, they found only three members.
- Of the Templars who were captured in England during the first wave of arrests, many managed to escape from prison. This means that they had help, either on the inside or the outside.
- The first wave of arrests in England happened three months after the order was originally given on the continent. This would provide the Templars in England time to make preparations and prepare their legacy and hiding places.

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- During those three months, the Templars could well have erected a new organization, a loosely structured group designed to help them following the order from the Pope.
- If such a group did exist, it would be founded with the considerable resources the Templars had at their disposal, which would be needed to carry on their fight long after the demise of the original members. Thus, it would be well-funded and would surely morph over the coming generations.
- If such an organization were to live for a long time, then the use of simple goals and objectives would allow them to remain focused, despite loose organization and the threat of detection.

But where could such an organization exist? Is it possible that we can draw a line between the fall of the Templars, the rebellion of the Great Society, and then the emergence of the Freemasons? We have already began to look at just how all three could feasibly share the same motivations and—as we will eventually see—how they share much of the same ideology. In the future, the Freemasons would even incorporate many of the Templars' words and phrases into their very existence. But in order to try and get to the bottom of this mystery, we will need to look north of the border. The key to all three organizations, it seems, is to be found in Scotland.

Scottish Roots

Scotland seems to be the common denominator when discussing the Freemasons and the Knights Templar. It is in Scotland that marks both the fall of the Templars and the rise of the Masons, though the exact nature of the transition is the hazy, difficult part. Depending on who you believe, such a transition could have taken place over a matter of years, of decades, or of centuries. In this next chapter, we will try to figure out how exactly the foundation might have been laid by the Templars to form the organization which might eventually become the Freemasons, as well as how this relates to the Great Society and the Peasants' Revolt. In order to achieve this, we should take a moment or two to consider the political situation in Scotland.

The relationship between Scotland and England is fractious, to say the least. Historically, the two countries have loathed one another for centuries. In a large part, this was due to the actions of a man we have already encountered in this book, Edward I. Nicknamed the Hammer of the Scots, Edward dedicated much of his life to dealing with problems to his north. We have already discussed Edward's role in restoring England's status and do not have time to go into great depth on the fascinating story of his wars with Scotland. However, a brief overview is necessary to set the scene.

Simply put, Scotland wanted to be independent from English rule. For clear reasons, England did not want this to happen. Relationships between the Lords of Scotland and the English crown allowed for a kind of accord, which suited both ruling parties. But the Scottish people were not pleased. From the ranks, a man rose up and fought against the English. His name was William Wallace. Immortalized in modern film, most people have heard of Wallace and his demands of freedom. He was one of the most successful Scottish battle commanders when it came to leading the fight against the English. By the end of 1297, Wallace had led small Scottish armies against much larger English forces and had won.

But Edward I was a formidable foe. He and Wallace locked horns and fought

against one another over the coming years. These battles were fought against a greater geopolitical struggle, as Scotland tried to win over the allegiance of France and the Vatican, hoping that such an alliance might secure their independence. England fought back on the diplomatic stage, too, as Edward sealed their own accord with France in 1303. Edward, who made great use of the military force of the Templar Knights, finally won over when he convinced Wallace's fellow Scots to betray him. Abandoned by many Scottish Lords, William Wallace was caught and then executed in horrific fashion. Edward I seemed to have won and earned himself the nickname which would eventually emblazon his tomb. He had finally hammered the Scots.

It was the monarchs to follow that would have the most importance, however. As strong a leader as Edward I had been, those who followed possessed none of his fortitude. By the time Edward II was crowned king of England, he had inherited a delicate situation. To the north, Scotland was ignited with hate against the English. To make matters worse, the emergence of Robert the Bruce meant he now faced a Scottish king of his own. Robert had murdered his rival for the crown and was beginning a renewed campaign for Scottish independence. Though he had initially suffered defeat while Edward I was alive, he had retreated and planned his revenge. The brutality of Edward I against the Scottish would leave his successor with a furious nation led by a daunting opponent.

To the south, the death of Edward I had many implications. While Edward I was well-regarded by Prince Philip of France, Edward II was nowhere near as impressive a figure. Indeed, it was Edward I's admiration and use of the Templars which meant that Philip was unable to make a move against the organization. With the death of Edward I, the Templars no longer enjoyed such protection. Philip, noting the power vacuum that had emerged, was now able to make his move. In tandem with the Vatican, he launched the campaign against the Knights Templar.

So this leaves us with two institutions with shared resentments. Scotland and the Knights Templar had both been betrayed by France and the Vatican. With the departure of Edward I, the Templars no longer enjoyed a position of

privilege within England. Hounded by Philip's forces and the church, they were forced to flee, to retreat from the public eye and to find a place of sanctuary. With their wealth and their knowledge, it seems as though they would have been welcomed across the border in Scotland. The two bodies shared similar enemies, which practically made them allies.

Following the orders issued by the Vatican for the outlawing of the Knights Templar, countries across Europe reacted differently. While Templars in Paris, for example, were captured, tortured, and executed, this was not the fate of every single member. True, the leaders of the Templars had been tempted to go to France before the order was issued and this meant that the top level leadership (including the grand master) was killed, with as many as 56 Templars being burned alive on just one day in Paris. In France, certainly, the strike against the Templars was vicious.

But in Spain and Portugal, for example, there was a greater threat. Muslim armies had been invading the Iberian Peninsula from the south, with the Templars' military branch being a key part of the fight against the invaders. Accordingly, the local branches of the church conducted their own inquisition into the Templars. While the French and Italian clergy had extracted confessions under torture— during which the Templars allegedly admitted to everything, from urinating on the cross to blaspheming against God—their Iberian counterparts found the Templars to be innocent. But that did not mean they could be allowed to exist. Instead, the local Templars were rebranded and emerged as an apparently new order, the Knights of Christ. A key difference in this new outfit was that they were responsible to the local king, rather than the pope. The new Knights of Christ were permitted to continue their fight against the Muslim invaders.

In Germany, it happened differently. Hugo of Gumbach, the local leader of the Templars, decided to don his battle armor and marched defiantly into the council being held by the Archbishop of Metz. There, he issued a proclamation assuring everyone that the Templars were entirely innocent and that their grand master was falsely accused. In fact, he stated, it was Pope Clement V who was the evil party. Hugo declared that he was no longer in thrall to the Holy See because of this. Along with all of the other Knights

Templar present, he was innocent. So convinced was he of his innocence, both he and the other armored knights would gladly enter into trial by combat with anyone who believed otherwise. Such accusations abated rather quickly.

On Cyprus, the pope's instructions carried even less weight. As the location of the Templar headquarters, it took months for the ruling Prince of Cyprus to even acknowledge the papal bull and when the Templars were eventually tried, they were found to be innocent. The trial so incensed the pope that he immediately dispatched his own team of inquisitors to the island to perform a retrial. Unfortunately, however, no documents tell us of the outcome of such a trial. By this time, however, the Templars would have had more than ample time to prepare for the Vatican's men.

Even in France, things were not panning out exactly as Philip had hoped. One of the main motivations for his taking down of the Templars—to take their vast wealth for himself—was proving to be difficult to satisfy. The treasure that he might have expected to find seemed to be gone. The Templar fleet, one of the largest in Europe, had similarly gone missing from La Rochelle. The eighteen ships that were owned and operated by the Templars seemed to have simply vanished from existence.

What wealth did remain would be transferred officially into the ownership of the Hospitallers. Eventually, Pope Clement V would decree that the wealth and property of the Templars would transferred to the rival order, excepting those on the Iberian Peninsula, due to the threat from the Muslim forces. It would be an order that angered Prince Philip, the French monarch hoping that a new order would be founded, with himself at the head, which would officially be granted the wealth of the Templars. There would be something of a concession to Philip, however, as local monarchs would be permitted the chance to recoup the money they had spent on the arrests, torture, and prosecution of the Templars, figures which might seem to have been plucked out of thin air. This desire to please everyone by the church would form the basis of a campaign to launch a new Crusade in the future.

So, while the treatment of the Templars was different across Europe, it was the situation in Great Britain that pertains most to the story we're telling. And

in England, the change in monarch was notable. The transition from one of the country's strongest kings to one of its weakest plays a big role in the tale.

There are many stories about King Edward II of England. One of the best known concerns the teenage king's love life, with many historians speculating that his true love was not the French princess to whom he was betrothed, but a young man named Piers Gaveston. Their blossoming homosexual romance had escaped Edward I's attention while the older king fought fiercely against Scotland. The relationship would eventually become a wedge driven between father and son, with the anger strong enough to prompt Edward I to strike his son and drag him around a room by his hair. Eventually, Gaveston was banished.

Naturally, the new King Edward II's first act was to recall his lover from banishment. The move set the tone for the new reign, with the king's council vying for power. Gaveston's role in this was to mock his lover's advisors, causing consternation throughout the aristocracy of the country. This proved to be a distraction when the papal orders filtered through. While Clement V demanded that the court deal with the Templars, those in power were too distracted by the question of how to deal with Piers Gaveston. Against this backdrop, Robert the Bruce was resuming his war for independence and the upcoming wedding between Edward and Isabella of France was occupying the thoughts of many.

The pope and Philip both petitioned the English to hurry up in their prosecution of the Templars. The new king seemed reluctant to believe the charges, though. His father had been a strong advocate and ally of the Templars and their presence was a notable part of the young prince's childhood. He believed the charges to be false and wrote to other monarchs around Europe asking for their support on the matter. Before they could reply, the official papal decree reached him and Edward was left with no choice.

That's not to say he acted immediately, however. A period of months existed between receiving the decree and persecuting the English Templars. It was more than enough time for the Templars to make plans. When the king's men

eventually rode out from London to track down the Templars, they found the knights had simply vanished. Only a few stragglers were caught. Furthermore, the records kept by the order had vanished with them. Even the Templars' treasure seemed to have disappeared. When the officers entered the Templars London headquarters, expecting to find a huge amount of wealth, they found less than £200, a fraction of what was expected.

At the same time, King Edward II had also vanished. He had departed to France to be married to the young Princess Isabella (twelve years old at the time) and had left Gaveston in charge. That meant that Gaveston—to the horror of the nobles—was not only ruling the kingdom but was in charge of the prosecution of the Templars. He didn't seem to care for the task and the attempts to capture any Templars in the months following the papal decree were half-hearted. Of the few who were captured, some even managed to escape. Either there was a properly organized escape plan held by the Templars, or the people conducting the pursuit had little taste for the prosecution. In likelihood, it was a combination of both.

In England, those Templars that were captured were not tortured. Though they remained incarcerated by the time Edward returned to the country and afterwards, they were not subjected to the same horrors that befell those captured Templars on the continent. This riled the pope to the point where he sent his own torturers over to England to carry out the task, as well as threatening excommunication for anyone who helped the Templars in any way. Even though Edward placed some restrictions on the torturers working in England—no mutilations, for example—he nevertheless bowed to the ultimate papal authority. While this seemed to bring no confession out of the few Templars in prison, it had the effect of driving the hidden members even further from the gaze of authorities gaze.

While England eventually acquiesced to the pope's whims, Scotland was a different story. The pope tried and failed to have Templars in Scotland arrested. Indeed, despite the fact that Robert the Bruce did make a few perfunctory arrests in the first month of 1308, his on-going military struggles meant that—when confronted with a trained and useful military man such as an armored knight—he was more prone to recruitment than punishment.

Robert was disinterested in any potential Crusade, didn't care about monastic military organizations, cared not for Philip of France or the pope, and was aware that trouble was brewing down south as Edward II prepared to resume his father's campaign to quell Scottish independence. To that end, he had allegedly cast aside the papal decree concerning the Templars. It was never announced in Scotland. As such, it seemed that Scotland was a legal sanctuary for any fleeing Templars.

That meant that, should any Templar knight find himself in a difficult legal situation down in England or Europe, he could not only expect to find haven in Scotland, but he might well be welcomed with open arms, providing he was willing to join Robert the Bruce's military. Given that the Scottish cavalry at the time was supposedly poor in numbers and quality, trained and equipped knights were essential.

By 1313, England was in a precarious position. A longstanding issue with Piers Gaveston and the nobles had eventually led to the king's lover being executed. As the nobles tried to reassert influence over Edward II, the king's father-in-law—Philip of France—advised that he should ratify his allegiance to the church. This meant embarking on the Vatican's newly announced Crusade. A year earlier, the same council which had official disbanded the Templars once and for all announced an attempt to reclaim the Holy Land in the name of Christendom. Despite England ostensibly pledging to help, to do so would have been suicidal. Sending off the country's best fighting men when Robert the Bruce stared down from Scotland would have undone all the progress Edward I had worked so hard to achieve. Even while the Crusade was announced, Robert was moving through Scotland and steadily reclaiming castle after castle. If Edward wanted to reclaim his authority in the kingdom —and if he wanted to use a successful military campaign to do so—then the Crusades were not the opportunity he needed. Instead, he would have to fight the Scottish.

And so Edward rallied a force of 25,000 men to march north and dominate Scotland once and for all. In his army, the king of England had 5,000 cavalry and 10,000 archers. In response, Robert the Bruce was able to muster 10,000 troops. But Robert knew the English were coming. Long before Edward and

his army arrived, the Scottish could carefully select the battlefield. As the English marched mile after mile, making themselves tired and hungry, the Scottish dug in and made sure they were well fed and refreshed. As it happened, Robert placed his army on the spot between the advancing English from the south and one of the few remaining English outposts in the region, Stirling Castle. This meant Edward would not be able to resupply before he met the Scottish army.

When it came to planning the battle, Robert drew on everything he had learned from William Wallace. He dug potholes across the field to hinder the English armed knights and hid men with twelve foot spears to take down the horses that might charge the Scots. These he hid under cover, camouflaging their presence. Wallace had been betrayed when his own cavalry, led by one of the disgruntled nobles, had abandoned him at a vital moment. Not wishing to fall to the same fate, Robert placed himself at the head of Scotland's small band of armored knights. According to the legend, the core of these cavalry men were made up of fugitive Templars, men who had fled north and accordingly sworn allegiance to Robert. The battle would allow them to exact some modicum of revenge on the man who had betrayed them to the pope.

It was a famous Scottish victory. As the English army was outflanked, they turned and fled. The deciding moment had come when the followers of the Scottish camp—the women, boys, and other non-combatants—had suddenly decided to take up arms and swarm the English, who assumed this to be a fresh wave of Scottish reinforcements. The fleeing army was routed, with England losing as many as 15,000 men compared to Scottish losses of just 4,000. The Scottish victory was so resounding that it would put an end to English rule over Scotland for close to 400 years.

In addition, the sheer scale of the English defeat left Edward II's kingdom in anarchy. Ambitious nobles, disgusted by their ruler's ineptitude, began to take on more power for themselves. Across the country, the collapse of law and order meant that bands of outlaws began to roam free. It became the time of the feted outlaw heroes, men such as Robin Hood who fought against the corrupt rulers and preyed on the wealthy. Eventually, the ramifications of the defeat would be so violent for Edward II that he would lose his throne. Not

only would he no longer be king, but he was betrayed by his wife and his nobles, the former summoning a mercenary army and the latter welcoming said army warmly. By 1327, on the 22 nd of September, Edward was executed. Such was the humor of the executioners when dealing with the homosexual king that they choose one final insult. The method of execution involved thrusting a red hot iron spit directly up Edward's rectum. In his place, Edward III—at the time still a teenager – would take over the throne. It would be Edward III's successful reign which would set the scene for the eventual Peasants' Revolt.

So where does this leave the Templars and the Freemasons? According to the legend, they would be found in Scotland. So disastrous was the reign of Edward II that not only did he lose Scotland for centuries, but his actions were essential in driving the outlawed Templars north. Once they arrived, they would have needed to remain in secret. After all, their very existence was deemed an affront to god. But their riches, their military expertise, and their very presence were a boon to the Scottish king. So, with the need to remain in hiding, the hidden Templars would need to repurpose their organization. They were no longer a military order of knights, as such, but were now a clandestine secret society. They had an agenda, with vengeance that needed to be inflicted. Still very much fugitives, their mind set would have needed to have changed from men on the run to those in hiding, from world domineering men of power to cold and calculating power players. As they moved behind the scenes, the Templars would have needed to become a powerful secret society. Still maintaining their ambitions, could they have become the Great Society which would trouble England seven decades later?

Fugitives

On paper, the flight of the Knights Templar was well set up to succeed. Those Templars in England, Cyprus—and most places other than Italy and France—were given as many as three months in which they could plan their escape. Add to this the wealth, the political connections, and the means of transportation (especially the fleet) the Templars possessed and it's easy to see why so many people believe that the order possessed the organization necessities needed to escape persecution. Obviously, a number of the higher profile Templars were executed, and many hundreds of members were both tortured and killed. But on the whole, the attempt to totally annihilate the Templars seemed to have failed.

But that didn't meant the Templars had it easy. They had been officially outlawed by the church. This seemingly meant a blanket ban across Europe. All of Christendom was seemingly antithetical to their presence, as decreed by the pope. All around was enemy territory. Given that a huge proportion of the land in Europe was owned by various church-affiliated groups, none of whom were particularly beholden to the Templars, most areas were dangerous for members. Add in the fact that they would have stood out among the locals by their dress, their hairstyles, their mannerisms, and even the fact that they were chiefly a French speaking society, meant that going into hiding would have been more than difficult.

This meant that a fugitive Templar would need assistance. If he was to pass under a new identity — as would surely be essential—then he would need someone to vouchsafe for his new character. At a time when towns and cities were far smaller than they are today (London, for example, was a city of 25,000 and the biggest in England) that would have to be done on a personal level. The Templars needed friends.

It is here that we see a striking similarity between what the Templars suddenly required and one of the most ancient rules of Freemasonry. Known as one of the Old Charges of the Masons, the rule states that no brother

should go “into a town” unless he can do so in the presence of another brother who can vouchsafe him, or “witness” on his behalf. Given the authorities held the power to arrest strangers who received no such backing, there is clear historical precedent for an old rule which is now dealt with in mostly a figurative sense. Indeed, the five years which passed between the first announcement of the pope’s anti-Templar order and the final, official dissolution of the organization, plus the slowed down or delayed process undertaken in certain countries, there would have been more than enough time for the Templars to erect a secret structure of checks and balances. Code words and pass phrases could denote trust, with their existence easily spread through the Templar community before they went into hiding. By the time the authorities finally came looking for them, these checks and balances could help the outlawed Templars remain hidden.

We should take an extra moment to mention one of the biggest mysteries of the Templars. What happened to their fleet? The ships which departed from La Rochelle made up one of Europe’s wealthiest armadas, but seemed to simply vanish. The fleet had arrived in France to bring grand master Jacques de Molay to the pope, whereupon he would be arrested. But when the authorities went to find the Templar ships, they had vanished. Their presence is not recorded in the chronicles of any other French port, nor are they mentioned as having docked in the Thames or any other major port.

There has been much speculation over what happened to these ships. For those Templars who were on board, not only were the galleys a valuable asset in and of themselves, but they also provided the perfect means to evade the authorities. They could be sailed anywhere, while still providing a living space at the same time. If they so desired, the Templars could simply have lived aboard their ships, making land occasionally only to replenish their supplies, and even that could be done in any smaller, less visible port. The ships even provided the Templars with the chance to make a living, as they happened to be the ideal vessels for high seas piracy. Should they be so inclined, the military minds of the newly-outlawed Templars could have easily used their ships to board others in the Mediterranean or even raided the coast. As a side note, there is a confusing section of the initiation ceremony of the modern Master Mason, in which the man pledged to make himself a

brother to “pirates and corsairs.” It seems a strange entry in the Masonic rules, but some have pointed towards this as being a link to the missing Templar fleet. While worth noting, however, this is almost entirely speculation.

For some people, however, the fate of the Templar fleet ties neatly into the story that we are trying to uncover. There has been much written about what happened to the ships after they departed La Rochelle, as well as what they were carrying. Though the most imaginative end of the spectrum often contains flights of fancy such as the Holy Grail and other religious relics, it’s worth noting that the wealth and knowledge of the Templars was likely far more traditional. They were a wealthy group, with members sourced from every country and every social group. They knew a great deal about a great many people. When the ships vanished, that information resided within the members. Accordingly, many believe that this wealth and knowledge would be combined with another society, merging together the nascent principles of a band of stone masons with the recently forbidden knowledge of the Templars. For some people, the missing Templar fleet provides the catalyst for the notion that the order combined with the fledging Freemasons. But could a fugitive group such as the Knights Templar really have combined with a seemingly random collection of stone masons?

Taken at face value, the idea that the Knights Templar and the Freemasons share a common heritage seems to be incredible and almost unbelievable. Here we have two of the most notorious secret societies in history, the idea that they might be linked somehow seems to be nothing more than wishful thinking. But, over the course of this book, we have looked at the background of medieval Europe, and England in particular, as being the ideal melting pot for any number of clandestine groups. Shared resentments, similar patterns, and a mysterious history unite both groups. But there is something more than just pure speculation linking the two societies.

The traditional history of the Freemasons holds that their fraternities emerged from a guild-like organization that regulated and promoted the works of tradesmen. This is perfectly conceivable and, indeed, much evidence exists to demonstrate that there is a great deal of truth to the matter. But it is not

incompatible with the idea that the Templars had an influence on the fledgling masonry guilds. Take, for example, the Old Charge of Freemasonry, one of the organization's oldest pledges. The rule requires members to promise that they will reveal no secret of any fellow member which might eventually lead said member to lose either his life of his property. For an organization which existed to promote and protect tradesmen and their skillsets, this rule doesn't make much sense. For a fugitive Templar, it is absolutely essential. There are free secrets held by the stonemasons which might have endangered someone's life or their property, while secrets were often a matter of life and death for those in any way associated with the Templars.

So a theory emerges. This theory suggests that the Templars, fugitives on the run from the authorities, somehow merged with the earliest iterations of the Freemasons. Accordingly, such a merger resulted in many Templar rituals and ideas being inserted into the rules and charges of the Freemasons. It seems outrageous on the surface, but taking a closer look at some of the historical records can reveal an increasing amount of support for this theory.

Let's take a look at the three organizations who might be regarded, in the 14 th Century, as being the enemies of the Knights Templar. These were: the monarchy, the church, and the Knights Hospitallers. Of these three enemies, it is perhaps the church which presented the biggest challenge to the fugitive Templars. For their entire existence, the Knights Templar had been a religious organization. Christianity was baked into the very foundation of the order, who answered only to the pope and, thus, to God. But the Templars had been betrayed by the very man they answered to. The church had declared them to be outlaws and heretics. While they might have retained a belief in God, the Templars had been cut off from their supposed leader, their grand master having been burned alive by the pope himself.

In the medieval mind-set, trying to balance a fervent belief in God's existence with this kind of betrayal must have been difficult. In complete secrecy, it seems unsurprising that the Templars might have grown to resent the institution of the Catholic Church, and hated the corruption and greed that it had come to represent. But these thoughts were necessarily private. At the

time, there was no alternative. The Vatican held a monopoly on belief in Western Europe. Though the seeds of what would become the Protestant Reformation had been planted, they were yet to blossom into a real Christian alternative. The very fact that the Templars were able—or, in actual fact, forced—to entertain such thoughts in complete secrecy became key to their resentment of the church and how this manifested.

As such, we should look at the Freemasons' and their comprehension of religion. In the Freemasons, there is one single point which has formed the foundation of the society as a whole. That is, the central tenet around which all other rules and regulations revolve. Before being considered a member, a Freemason must assert his belief that there exists one Supreme Being. But, beyond this initial belief, religious matters are not regulated. How the individual practices such belief is not a concern of the Freemasons. Indeed, members are forbidden from discussing their beliefs when inside the Lodge and are forbidden from trying to convert other Masons to their particular viewpoint. This central rule of Freemasonry is both essential and ancient. It is the one rule which has lasted longer than any other. It is the foundation of Freemasonry.

It is easy to see how such a rule intersects with the idea of Templar influence. At the time, religious beliefs of a stonemason or tradesmen would not matter. Indeed, with the church simply being a domineering force, everyone would simply be expected to follow the Vatican's guidance. Such a rule would be, seemingly, unnecessary. But for the Templars, thrust into a world of self-doubt and resentment, a rule made sense. As a monastic order, they would not have relinquished their belief in God. But recent experiences with the Vatican would not only have opened their minds to alternative forms of religious practice, but would have made it a danger for them to have discussed such matter. Better instead that, aside from being assured that all members believed in a Supreme Being, religious matters were not discussed within the society. Such a rule provided a greater degree of protection for possible Templars than it might have done for any stone masons.

It's possible to draw such links consistently when looking through the ancient precepts of Freemasonry. Many of the society's oldest rules and regulations

seem to be perfectly suited to fostering fugitive Templars from the authorities and integrating them into the organization. But, and this should be stated numerous times, trying to find historical evidence for such a tie remains elusive. There exists no one definitive document or record which suggests that there was a secret society founded by fugitive members of the Knights Templar. Thus, the majority of the links we discover and the theories we devise remain theoretical. But that does not put an end to the investigation.

Trying to figure out the Masonic comprehension of religion, for example, is still difficult. Medieval guilds were ostensibly religious organizations. They were, as evidenced throughout Europe, devoted to the church. They had patron saints, they staged religious plays and performances, they donated to local churches, they commissioned religious artworks, they would often help members go on pilgrimages, they would occasionally proclaim to own holy relics, and they would be tightly tied into the fabric of their local community in a way which worked in tandem with the church. This was not just true of almost every stone masons' guild, but almost every guild throughout Europe. So why should one particular guild develop such a secular, secretive approach to religious notions? Why would a guild of stone masons seemingly develop a rule which not only presupposed Christianity but allowed for members of other religions, too?

Indeed, the only people excluded by the Freemasons' rule seems to be atheists, a religious position almost alien to the medieval mind. When looking at the history of the Masons, it's just one example of how more and more questions emerge the closer you look. That the existence of a Templar influence seems to answer so many of these questions so perfectly hints towards a theory which is almost impossible to prove. Such a rule, it's obvious, would be ideal for the fugitive Templars who needed protection from their society and a means of expressing their sudden religious doubts. Now enemies of the church but retaining their religious position as a monastic order, these fleeing Templars were the perfect beneficiaries of the Freemasons' rule. When piecing together the jigsaw, the facts all slide neatly into place.

Let us again look at the simple facts of the matter before drawing any

conclusions:

- The Knights Templar had been outlawed by the Catholic Church, the organization to which they had supposedly devoted their lives.
- The members were given enough time to prepare themselves for hiding and possessed great resources, skills, and knowledge which would facilitate such a move.
- Following the papal decree, the Templars had good reason to resent the church, the monarchy, and the Knights Hospitaller.
- Scotland, due to political reasons, provided the Templars with a perfect place to hide.
- Around the end of the 14 th Century, there begun to exist a secret society whose members referred to themselves as Masons.
- Though supposedly emerging from one of the many trade guilds that existed in medieval Europe, there is no documented evidence of the exact origin of said secret society.
- The so-called Freemasons and their rules seemed to be perfectly ideologically suited to fugitive Templars who wished to evade detection.
- Many of these rules would have been irrelevant to the day-to-day life of a stone mason in the late 14 th Century.
- Both the Freemasons and the Knights Templar share an identification with the Temple of Solomon as being important to their beliefs.
- Behind the organization of the Peasants' Revolt was a so-called Great Society, who seemed to provide structural advice and backing to the rebellion.

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- The Peasants' Revolt targeted institutions, properties, and resources which were owned and operated by groups and organizations who would be considered enemies of the Knights Templar.
- No members of the Great Society were ever caught and formally tried.

When working through the points, it seems clear that it's possible to draw a line through the facts and emerge with a theory that the Knights Templar, on the run from the authorities, was able to have an influence on the founding principles of what would eventually become Freemasonry. These ideas manifested themselves during the Peasants' Revolt before vanishing back into the ether. Moving through all of the similarities and parallels between the Freemasons and the fugitive Templars would take more space than is available in this book, though one is left with the notion that there is much more to the idea than is supported by the scant evidence we have from the period. After all, the very defining feature of a secret society is that it is, in fact, secret. Trying to uncover the truth from a distance of six centuries is almost impossible. But that does not mean that speculation and investigation is not possible.

Instead, we should leave this concept firmly in our mind and move on to the early history of the Freemasons. Throughout these next sections of the book, it can help to remember just how exactly a Templar influence in the Freemasons might have dictated the organization's ideological course or helped nudge them in a certain direction. While we are left without much in the way of definitive physical evidence, the majority of this book has thus far worked to establish the idea that such a connection is not impossible. As we move through to the ending, the journey thus far should illuminate what is to come. While we might not be able to answer the question of what happened to the Knights Templar, we can ask whether the early years of the Freemasons could possibly have been influenced by such a group.

The Birth of the Freemasons

These days, the Freemasons are a global concern. Not in the conspiratorial sense, whereby the Masons are blamed (or credited) with any manner of geopolitical events. Rather, they are a global organization. Indeed, the Freemasons are the largest fraternal organization anywhere on the planet. Their members total nearly three million in the USA alone. In Britain, considered the birthplace of Masonry, there are as many as 700,000 members. Around the world, there is a million more. Such an organization attracts interest, which is why as many as fifty thousand pieces of literature have been produced concerning the Freemasons, from books to pamphlets to magazine articles to websites. The book you are reading right now is just one of many texts which attempt to examine some aspect of Freemasonry. It is, as mentioned, a global concern.

The world has changed since 1312, when the Knights Templar was formally dissolved. It has changed since 1381, when the Peasants' Revolt took place. It has changed since 1717, when the Freemasons decided to officially reveal themselves to the world. These days, the Freemasons are an entirely different organization from what came before. Though they might still wear the dressings of the original secret society, the sheer interest and information available to the wider population means that they are something of a shadow of their former selves. This book is not interested in modern Masonry, such as it is. Instead, we want to know more about the origins of the Freemasons and how they might have been influenced.

One of the most difficult parts of examining the history of the Masons is the books written by actual members. Over the years, there have been efforts by writers to not only included seemingly any influential historical figure as a noted member, but also to place early Masonic branches in places such as ancient Egypt, Celtic Britain, and Persia. At one time, it seemed as though the Masonic scholars were competing to see what outrageous claims they could make and get away with. These days, such inclinations have died down, but have left the waters muddied for those of us who seek to know the truth.

Over time, the historians have gradually retreated in their claims. After the dalliances with ancient history, there were claims that linked the first Masons with the founding of the Temple of Solomon (establishing a link between the Masons and the Templars) which was based on a few lines in the Master Mason's initiation ceremony. But historical links with the actual Temple of Solomon (and how it is described in the bible) do not correlate with the lines in the ritual. Instead, the lines seem more allegorical.

So while there is little evidence which links the founding of the Freemasons with Solomon's Temple, as conceded by modern Masonic historians, Templar influence is not precluded. Indeed, such links between the Temple of Solomon (the verified headquarters of the Templars following the First Crusade) and the Freemasons seem to be derived from medieval guilds. But why were medieval tradesmen, men who should have been more concerned with tools, techniques, and materials, delving into allegorical Christianity? Such matters only serve to raise more questions.

In fact, there are only really two organizations which claim the Temple of Solomon in common. They are the Freemasons and the Knights Templar. Is this a coincidence? Or is it the case of the demise of one such organization helping foster the rise of the other, sharing with it several key beliefs and approaches, as well as resources, tactics, enemies, and ideologies?

The circumstances certainly seem to suggest that this was the case. The Templars in England had a great deal of time to prepare themselves in 1307, matched by the fact that the newly crowned King Edward II was one of the weakest and most ineffective in the country's history. Such men would have been welcomed across the border in Scotland but would have needed to remain hidden.

Indeed, such was the delay between the beginning and the official end of the persecution of the Templars by the church—lasting seven years, from 1307 to 1314—that those Templars who were driven into hiding would have had their secretive bonds forged together. Over seven years in hiding, these hidden fugitives could have become like brothers, their structure and organization growing more formal and codified by the day. By the time the persecution of the Templars had officially ended, those in hiding may have morphed into a brand new secret society, one which remembered the wrongs of the past. With resentment of the church, the crown, and the Hospitallers as their natural focus, the fugitive Templars found themselves in possession of a new organization, more secretive than before, one which could have made its base in Scotland.

The signs and icons of Freemasonry are easily explained by the existence of the Templars. The square and compass logo, for example, is strikingly similar to the seal of Solomon that represented the Templars original home. One need only remove the horizontal lines from the Templar seal to discover a simple interpretation of the Masonic symbol. Elsewhere, around the typical Masonic Lodge, one might see the circles and mosaics which were shared in common with Templar iconography. The clothing worn during Masonic rituals, the oaths taken, the colors, the signs, and almost everything else about the rituals of the Freemasons can be tied to the Knights Templar.

Historians have uncovered many examples of the rules and orders of tradesmen guilds from across medieval Europe. Often, these are dry and uninteresting pieces. They lay out the terms for membership and so on. Never do they seem anything like the ordinances of the Freemasons. Instead, it seems as though the Freemasons rules are best not interpreted literally. Rather, they are figurative lessons, a cover story which allowed for the existence of what was ostensibly a guild but had a secret purpose: to conceal the remaining members and ideas of the Knights Templar.

There were even certain groups within the Masons who, in the 18 th Century, would take the name ‘Knights Templar’ to recognize a high-ranking, exclusively Christian group within the Freemasons. These kinds of links are undeniable, though it is difficult to say how much is original and how much was devised later by the Masons and constructed purposefully in remembrance and deference to the Templars. Rather, the best evidence is often found at the brief moment between the fall of the Templars and the rise of the secret Masonic Lodges.

Over time, as the Templars died out and new recruits were added, such an organization morphed and evolved. The mutual protection offered by the codes and rules led to agendas and grudges being carried over. Before the group was even formally known as the Freemasons—when they were still an almost completely secret society—they almost emerged into the public consciousness when wreaking havoc on their old enemies during the Peasants’ Revolt. As such, the Peasants’ Revolt is one of the key moments in

this story, as it shows us the best example of the secret society which existed in between the Templars and the Masons, a group which was still evolving and maturing. That it should only have been known as the Great Society seems to reveal such change, as well as how little anyone really knew about the group.

But, as ever, these ideas must be tempered by the very legitimate expectation for evidence. While the facts may all seem to align and corroborate with this theory, there is a lack of physical proof. In these terms, aside from the whisperings about the Great Society, we are left with a period from the beginning of the 14 th Century to the beginning of the 18 th Century in which th last official documentation of the Templars fades and the official emergence of the Freemasons begins. So how should we examine this gap and what does it mean for the theory?

Again, we can connect the dots and evidence of a type does begin to emerge. We return once again to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, simply because it was a time when these secret machinations we are attempting to discuss seemed to rise so close to the surface. There are hints of Mason and Templar activity in the motivations and actions of the rebels. The targeting of the Hospitallers, the executions of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the ease with which they strode into the Tower of London, the protection accorded the Templar church, and the occasion mention of the so-called Great Society. All of these can be linked in some way to one of the two (or even both) organizations. Walter the Tyler, with his Masonic-influenced name, seemed to direct the rebellion in a military manner, something familiar to the Templars. As the head of a secret society—one with seemingly incredible resources, knowledge, and influence—Tyler could well have been one of the earliest Masons of the last Templars.

Even in the time after the Peasants' Revolt, the existence in England of the Lollards (a religiously motivated secret society whose existence we have neither the time nor the space to cover in great depth) hints at a group operating behind the conventional structures of government, away from the official records. The man who succeeded the executed Archbishop of Canterbury after the Revolt went so far as to identify the Lollards in 1382,

especially through his attempts to have the group destroyed. But the Lollards —in one form or another—survived. We know more about the Lollards over the course of the next two centuries, with their structure and organization having been documented in real sources. Though they were seemingly unconnected to the Freemasons or the Templars, their existence is proof in itself that a secret society could function and exist in medieval England. Their existence continued through the medieval age and into the time of the Reformation. Every now and then, they would spring into action, such as the time in 1414 when Sir John Oldcastle led a revolt against the crown.

There are many similarities between the Lollards and the Freemasons, but perhaps the most important fact concerning the Lollards is simply that they existed at all. As such, we have hard evidence that a secret society could not only operate in England but that they could wield great power. Evidence such as Henry Kingston's documented account of Lollard movements in Leicester reveals a group who had taken St. John as their patron saint (the same as the Freemasons) and named themselves for him, had held secret meetings, preached ideas similar to those held by the Masons (against lawsuits in the case of debt, for example), were protected by knights in the area, and were persecuted for heresy. This description of a Lollard cell provides not only a template for what could eventually become Freemasonry, but could even be construed as an early example of the same secret society in action. This could easily be the description of a 14 th Century Masonic Lodge.

Such circumstantial evidence carries us through to the 17 th Century. By this time, the Lollards had seemingly disbanded. Religious ideas in England were preoccupied by the Reformation but reports of secret societies had not ceased. The historian C. V. Wedgwood, for example, notes in a book about the reign of Charles I that there were reports from the Archbishop of Canterbury about secret meetings that were happening throughout the kingdom. This culminated in the arrest of a man named Trendall, who happened to be preaching against the church's hierarchy in London. It was the Archbishop's desire to burn the man at the stake, a means of punishing heretics that was almost a generation out of date. Even though the Archbishop wrote to colleagues for advice on how to conduct the burning, it never seems to have taken place. Trendall seems to have escaped the

punishment. Maybe he had friends in high places. All we know for sure is that he gave his profession as a stone mason.

It's similarly possible to chart the existence of Masonic principals as they become increasingly common in the work of noted public figures. Both John Locke and Francis Bacon, for example, included in their works numerous ideas and notions that have direct ties to Freemasonry. These could be incredibly specific—such as Locke's incorporation into the constitution of South Carolina prohibitions against filing lawsuits to retrieve money—or more general—such as Bacon's ideas about religion and science which echoed Masonic viewpoints, especially visible in his work titled the New Atlantis, which seems to imagine an entire society built in secret along Masonic principles. There are many such references throughout the 15 th , 16 tl and 17 th Centuries to Masonic ideas in literature. While these might seem circumstantial, they can be used to demonstrate how the Freemasons were having a growing influence in England at the time.

The idea that the Templars might have influenced the Freemasons is not a new one. Indeed, the history of the Freemasons just after they went public was rife with accusations of Templar influence. The Rite of Strict Observance, for example, was a German branch of the Freemasons set up in the 18 th Century which explicitly reorganized the structure of the Lodge and renounced the Templar origins of the Masons. In the view of the Strict Observance members, the Templar fugitives had travelled to Scotland and allied with a stone mason guild. Several hundred years later, this short lived branch of the masons rejected this supposed Templar influence. It was hardly intrinsic to the history of the Freemasons, but it demonstrates the notion as having existed long before this book.

Others have suggested that the occasional proposals of the links between the Freemasons and the Knights Templar are anything from a Jesuit plot designed to discredit the Masons, to a plot device used in novels and something which can therefore be dismissed. Often, such ideas depend on the acceptance that the Templars were indeed guilty of all of the false charges levelled against them by Prince Philip of France and the Vatican. As such, it can usually be read as an attempt to discredit the Freemasons by making them

guilty by association, an allegation that depends upon a falsified version of history.

But the idea persists. Even without evidence beyond the circumstantial, there are those who are convinced either way. People can be certain that the Templars founded the Masons or that there is no truth to the matter at all. Typically, those who are the most convinced in either direction tend to shout the loudest and remain the most vehement. But the most damaging aspect of the frequent arguments over the validity of the claim is that it seems to have endangered any real investigation into the matter. So adamant are the naysayers that no such link exists between the two secret societies, that our chances of ever learning the complete truth are surely diminished. Furthermore, the outlandish claims often concerning the Masons and the Templars—often those which lean in a more conspiratorial direction—can serve to discredit the notion in the public's mind. Even those theories that are demonstrably false and built on zero evidence—that the Freemasons were alive and present among the Celtic Druids, for example—only serve to muddy the waters when we try to find the verifiable facts behind the story.

However, there is no doubt that the Freemasons of today are different when compared to the Freemasons of the 18 th Century (or before). Today, their society is no longer secret. There are a great many books about the modern Masons which can help teach you everything, right down to the exact wording of the rituals themselves. It's only in the past, when we look towards history, that any true mystery surrounds the Freemasons. Of all the mysteries, it is their origin and their birth which will always remain the strangest and the most controversial. These days, being a member of the Freemasons is often a social pastime, even when ascending into ranks which explicitly reference the Knights Templar. Though the story of the Templars is told, the members are no longer concerned with vengeance or similar notions. While they are told the story, it seems to be a perfunctory retelling, rather than something meant to inspire or educate. Nowadays, the true importance of the Templars to the Freemasons is lost amongst the ocean of ritual, just another part of the history for which there is a thousand and one explanations. Unfortunately, the truth is hard to come by.

Conclusion

In the earliest days of the Christian faith, true believers had to keep their faith a secret. Banned from practicing their religion, they were one of the best examples of a secret society. To communicate with one another, they took logos. The image of a fish—the simple shape which is still used today—became a calling card for fellow Christians. It also provided them with a cover story, allowing anyone with a fish image to simply say that they were a fisherman rather than a member of an outlawed religion. Even after Christianity became an accepted practice, the image of the fish remained. The meaning changed, essentially, as it was no longer the calling card for a secret society. The fish was once a cover story, a means of staying alive when being hunted by the authorities. In many ways, it is a parallel to the idea of the Templars and the Freemasons.

As we have seen in this book, there exists a huge amount of circumstantial evidence that suggests that the fall of the Knights Templar coincided with the founding of a secret society in Great Britain. The fugitive Templars could well have allied themselves to a small Scottish guild of masons, taking on their icons and symbols as a cover story that allowed them to escape the persecuting eye of the authorities. Just as a guild might protect trade secrets, the Freemasons were founded to protect the lives of the Templars on the run. The ideas that they maintained and carried with them went on to form the foundation of the Freemason ideology which would persist into the present day. Though modern Freemasonry is not secret in much the same way that Christianity grew to be mainstream, the lasting legacy of the Templar influences remains in place just as the symbol of the fish is evident in almost every church around the world. Though the modern organization is entirely different, it does not hurt to remember the past.

In this book, we have not ventured into the territory of the conspiracy theory. Modern Masonic writing is often too obsessed with the idea of the secret society and how they might run the world from some clandestine bunker. But—just as this is almost certainly untrue—is does not do justice to the most

interesting aspects of the Masons' history. The involvement of the Knights Templar in the founding of the Freemasons is not something we can prove, though we can detect hints and suggestions as we look at history. Instead of regarding the Freemasons as some modern threat, we should look instead to their past and how they were shaped by events centuries ago. The truth of the link between the Knights Templar and the Freemasons might never be known, but we know enough to whet the appetite. When investigating a secret society, this is more than can ever be expected.

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Excerpt from Conrad Bauer's Book Secret Society Opus Dei: Catholicism's Secret Sect

Of the billion or so Catholics in the world, the members of Opus Dei constitute almost a hundredth of one percent. Though their numbers might be relatively minuscule, their reputation is many orders of magnitude greater. While the guiding lights of the Church have taken a more genial, modern approach to religion in the last century, the members of Opus Dei have stuck rigidly to the traditions of old. In doing so, they have become known as the hardcore. The fiercely devoted. The stringently religious. Unmoving, distant, and utterly compelling. In an age when the Vatican is reaching out to many millions of people worldwide, Opus Dei seems to be shrouded in secrecy, a secret sect that adheres to the ancient practices of Christianity.

Perhaps because of this adherence to the older models of Christianity, the group has come to represent the most devoted and most controversial of all Catholic arms. its practices are said to include ancient languages, self-flagellation, corporal mortification, aggressive recruiting, controlling the free will of members, cult-like behavior, misogynistic policies, support of fascists, and many more secrets hidden away within the organization's walls.

In this book, we will attempt to look deeply into the hidden history of Catholicism's most radical and divisive sect. Using ancient texts, accounts of former members, extensive research, and secret documents, we will discover the truth behind Opus Dei. If you would like to learn more about this zealous, sometimes terrifying organization, then read on. For the truth behind Catholicism's secret sect, this book is all you will ever need.

Getting to Know the Work of God

Before we begin our in-depth study of Opus Dei, we should take the time to get a general overview of the organization itself. It is commonly misunderstood, and there are many rumors, conspiracy theories, and

superstitions that surround the institution and its practitioners. If we are to discover the truth, then it is important to understand the basics.

The name itself is Latin. Translated, Opus Dei means “Work of God.” That gives us an insight into the core belief of the group. That is to say, it is their belief that God is not limited solely to the Church. Instead, one can infuse their own work with a sanctity and a dedication to religion at all times. Whether you’re an engineer, a plumber, or a schoolteacher, the work that you carry out as an Opus Dei member is dedicated to God. There is a religious appreciation of the mundane details of life, often giving the appearance of religious fervor that can appear odd to the outsider. Together, the members of the church and its clergy dedicate their lives and their work to the divine power. Literally, the day-to-day lives of members becomes the eponymous work of God.

But Opus Dei is so much more than this. Over time, the group has come to embody long-standing criticisms of Catholicism and the history of organized religion. It has become associated with a biblical literalism and a staunchly conservative mind-set. There have even been suggestions of a global conspiracy network. But how to these ideas relate to the basic principles of Opus Dei?

It is true, certainly, that a traditional problem of Opus Dei has been communicating their message to the layman. Often, the organization focuses on promoting what it is not, rather than what it is. This gives Opus Dei a defensive appearance, which – somewhat paradoxically – leads more people to become even more suspicious than ever before. To find out more about what Opus Dei actually is, let’s go back to the very beginning.

The date is October 2nd, 1928. A young Spanish priest named Josemaria Escriva makes a retreat to a secluded monastery in Madrid. Inside the Vincentian institution, he has a vision. The details of the vision seem strange, but Escriva is left with no doubt what he must do. After the experience, he is inspired to create his own organization, an order that would eventually become Opus Dei.

The vision of the Spanish priest was the inspiration for Opus Dei. Josemaria Escriva, the man who would later be regarded as the founder of the organization, would have subsequent visions, in which the further details of God's plan were laid out to him. Part of these visions seemed to give Escriva the general overall idea of Opus Dei, while others were more specific. There should be a dedicated branch for women, there should be an organized body of priests, and many other details that would go on to shape the structure and principles of the church. But these would all come later. According to Escriva himself, the original vision contained the essential elements of Opus Dei.

October the 2nd is a special day. It is a recognized day within the Catholic Church, known as the Feast of the Guardian Angels. It was on this day that Escriva received his vision. His own description of the event remembers that it was a feast day. According to the priest's description of his vision, it was on this day that the "Lord willed" that Opus Dei as a group "might come to be." Furthermore, he went on to describe the vision as one that told him of an organization in which men and women were willing to make a sacrifice of themselves for other people, in order to make sure all of the "ways of man" were divine and that every "upright work" would be suitably sanctified. Even if he did not have the structural backing, it clear to see that Escriva had the central tenants of what would prove to be a controversial interpretation of Catholicism.

It's important that Opus Dei's beginnings are the result of seemingly divine inspiration. Escriva's vision provided him and his followers with a holy mandate, a conviction in the importance of the organization's work. Opus Dei, as such, is an extension of God's will. So much so, in fact, that Escriva himself has denied being the actual founder of the group, instead saying that Opus Dei was "founded in spite of [him]" rather than because of him. The origins of the name itself are equally as parochial, with the group going unnamed before an apparently offhand, random comment from Escriva's confessor struck a chord with the priest. When he asked Escriva how the "work of God" was going, Escriva realized quickly that this was to be the name. As such, members now refer to the Church simply as "the Work."

At a foundational level, there is a simple message to Opus Dei's work. It's

the same one that was revealed in the vision and built upon in subsequent decades. That is to say, it is the goal of the members to sanctify the ordinary lives of people by living as taught by the gospels and the Church to the fullest extent possible. This is not too far from the belief that most Catholics would espouse, but the group takes their ideas to a more extreme conclusion that most worshippers.

To sum up their aims, Opus Dei members chose as their symbol a simple circle with a cross inside. The circle – representing the world – is sanctified from within. To the members, the idea of being holy is not something that is limited to the higher-ups of the Catholic Church or to the saints, but it is the potential destiny of every single Christian. It's not just the clergy, the nuns, the priests, the saints, or anyone else associated with the Church who are holy. Instead, it's something that is available to everyone in the world. Together, they can sanctify everybody, just as their logo suggests.

But this idea is not just expressed through the normal, typically religious actions such as praying. Instead, small and mundane parts of day-to-day life can become expressions of worship. In particular, one's work should be devoted to the Lord, whether you're an accountant or a construction worker. This is where the beliefs of the Opus Dei members begin to deviate from the path of the traditional Catholic adherents.

But the work of Escriva did not go unnoticed. As he was setting up his organization, he earned himself many admirers. People saw both the priest and his followers as being necessarily pious. Fans included the late Pope John Paul II, who would later describe the man as being ahead of his time. Giovanni Benelli – once the cardinal of Florence – would go on to have many doctrinal disagreements with Escriva, but he still saw fit to compare him with another founder of a dedicated group of Catholics, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order in the 16th Century. According to Benelli, Escriva similarly managed to translate contemporary discussions within the Catholic Church into a codified, dedicated organization.

The comparison to the Jesuits is particularly telling. For centuries, the Jesuits were seen as the most learned, the most devout, and the most dedicated

branch of the clergy. Though many disagreed with some of their practices – or even their very existence – there were many who saw the Jesuits as being absolutely necessary. For many Catholics, the simple existence of the Jesuits was comforting. It was reassuring to know that there were people on Earth who were suitably dedicated to God, suitably pure enough to preach his word and to investigate the ways in which modern life intersected with theology. To many people, Opus Dei filled a similar niche. As their reputation grew – initially within the Catholic community – they developed their reputation for dedicated religious practice. It is out of this dedication that their more controversial elements began to emerge.

Trying to get a grip of the more theological elements can be tough. For anyone who has studied the intricacies of the Catholic doctrine, there are a number of smaller, more refined points where Opus Dei moves away from mainstream religious thinking. For the majority of people, however, it can be difficult to note the key differences between the majority of Catholic thought and the particular practices of Escriva's organization.

Opus Dei members have, on a number of occasions, attempted to publicly clarify their idiosyncratic beliefs. In 2004, for example, an interview with Fernando Ocariz (at the time, the second-highest ranking member of Opus Dei) made an effort to clarify some of Escriva's teachings. The "universal call to holiness" that defines the organization can be split into two distinct parts: the subjective and the objective. The subjective invites people to sanctification. In other words, anyone – regardless of who they are – is called to become a saint. The objective is part of this, in that it states that everything in the world and every element of the human experience can be used to move someone closer toward becoming a saint. For Opus Dei members, every action and every situation is a chance to move closer towards sainthood.

Typically, most Catholics would see sainthood as being something that is limited to only the most holy people. Looking through the traditional pantheon of saints, they were typically priests, monks, or nuns. But for Opus Dei, this is not a limitation. All members, should they follow the Opus Dei teachings, can become saints in their own right. Borrowing words and phrases from the Bible's famous Song of Songs, Escriva himself sought to

find God “in the things that come from outside,” that is to say, the general day-to-day minutiae of life and work.

But there was a theological drive on the part of Opus Dei’s creator. Escriva is on the record as describing his organization as being an “intravenous injection” directly into the “bloodstream of society.” The image is vivid and speaks of how great a shock he saw Opus Dei as causing. Escriva wanted to make his group different from the common views of the church, and even in the early days, went to great lengths to ensure that he was able to differentiate Opus Dei from the typical Catholic denominations.

There’s a story told about the first three priests who were ordained by Opus Dei. The three men – all Spanish priests – were chosen by Escriva himself to represent the organization. The attention to detail was so great that Escriva noticed that not a single man out of the three smoked cigarettes. In Spain at the time, smoking was commonplace. The fact that none of the three priests smoked made Escriva concerned. What if people believed that the priests didn’t smoke due to their membership in Opus Dei? People might believe that not smoking was a part of the belief system, something that was not true. After some discussion, it was decided that one of the three men would take up smoking so as to pacify any concerns the general public might have had. It was not that Opus Dei were anti or pro cigarettes, more that it was concerned with reaching as many people as possible. The man chosen to smoke was Alvaro del Portillo, the man who would later take on Escriva’s role as the head of the organization.

In a similar vein, it was decided that the priests would forgo the traditional Catholic attire, dressing instead in simpler clothes. They would not be cloistered, meaning that groups of priests would not live solitary, excluded lifestyles. Perhaps most importantly, all of the priests in Opus Dei would not claim that it had some special, sanctimonious state of life. That is to say, they were no more predisposed to sainthood than anyone else, regardless of their occupation. Rather than removing themselves from the world, these priests hoped to “Christianize” everything, hoping that their spiritual actions would set a precedent for other people to follow.

This approach was certainly revolutionary for its time. In Spain in the 1930s and 1940s, when Escriva was developing the foundations of Opus Dei, the traditional model of the Catholic Church would be considered a clergy-orientated organization. This means that the clergy would be religious leaders, elevated above the people in terms of their sanctity. For Escriva, this seemed wrong. Instead, Opus Dei focused on a model in which the clergy were on equal footing in all regards. Rather than leading people through religion, the priests were designed to act in a more supporting role. They were experts who could provide guidance and direction, rather than leaders who would strut at the head of the pack. Once the priests provided the laypeople with an understanding of God, it was down to the individual to decide how their particular actions could be made into an offering to the Lord.

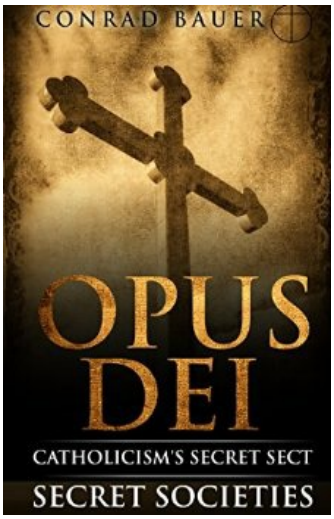
In principle, this idea would suggest that Opus Dei is an organization focused on equality. As we will see later in this book, the balance between men and women in the Opus Dei has faced much criticism. In theory, female Opus Dei members receive the same spiritual coaching and direction as their male counterparts, and they are equally capable of achieving sainthood through their actions. But in many of the smaller details, the Opus Dei attitude towards women is far from an equilateral balance. At the time, however, this attitude towards equality was a marked change from the mainstream. For many centuries, the Catholic Church has had a major issue with gender equality. Even this small doctrinal change by Escriva was a step towards equality, even if the ensuing decades have revealed inherent issues with gender that were not apparent at the time.

Such breaks from the mainstream Catholic doctrine led to many people criticizing Escriva. In certain parts of Spanish society, he was denounced as being anti-clerical. Some went as far as to call him a heretic. Rumors began to circulate that he would be reported to the Vatican, the spiritual center of the Catholic world, presumably in the belief that he would be apprehended, punished, and likely excommunicated. Even in its early days, Opus Dei was controversial.

For most people, trying to come to terms with Opus Dei as an organization

can be difficult. It is unlike almost every other branch of Christianity, and this seems to be intentional. Escriva himself described Opus Dei as “a disorganized organization.” The people in the group are united by their shared interpretation of Catholicism and their belief in sanctifying the world from within. There is a frequently repeated phrase that gives an insight into the decentralized nature of the group: “Opus Dei doesn’t act; its members do.”

But is this true? Long-time critics of Opus Dei have suggested that this pretense of decentralized, independent members is a myth. Instead, Opus Dei does indeed have an intention, an organization, and a set of goals, all of which are hidden behind the smokescreen of general theology. While the majority of members might ascribe to Escriva’s original vision, others are focused on seizing power, gaining financial wealth, or recruiting new members. All of these actions are kept hidden away from the public, who seem happy to believe that Opus Dei is just a particularly dedicated sect of the Catholic Church. With both sides of the argument adamant about its version of the truth, it might help to learn more about the individual requirements of each and every member. In the next chapter, we will look at what it takes to become a fully paid-up member of Opus Dei.



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